

By the Grace of the Gods

8

Roy

Illust. Ririnra



VISIT...

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A digital painting of a young woman with long, straight black hair, wearing a traditional maid's uniform. The uniform consists of a white long-sleeved blouse with a high collar and a black vest. She has a white ruffled headband and white gloves. She is standing in a garden at night, with a full moon in the background and a pond with lily pads in the foreground. The scene is illuminated by moonlight, creating a soft, ethereal atmosphere. The woman has a gentle expression and is looking slightly to the side.

“I was
assigned
to care
for you.”

A woman
in a maid's
uniform
appeared,
her straight
black hair
glimmering
in the
moonlight.

A grand wedding hosted at the duke's estate brings joy to all in attendance—

Reinhart

Elise

Hughes

Takebayashi
Ryoma

Lulunese





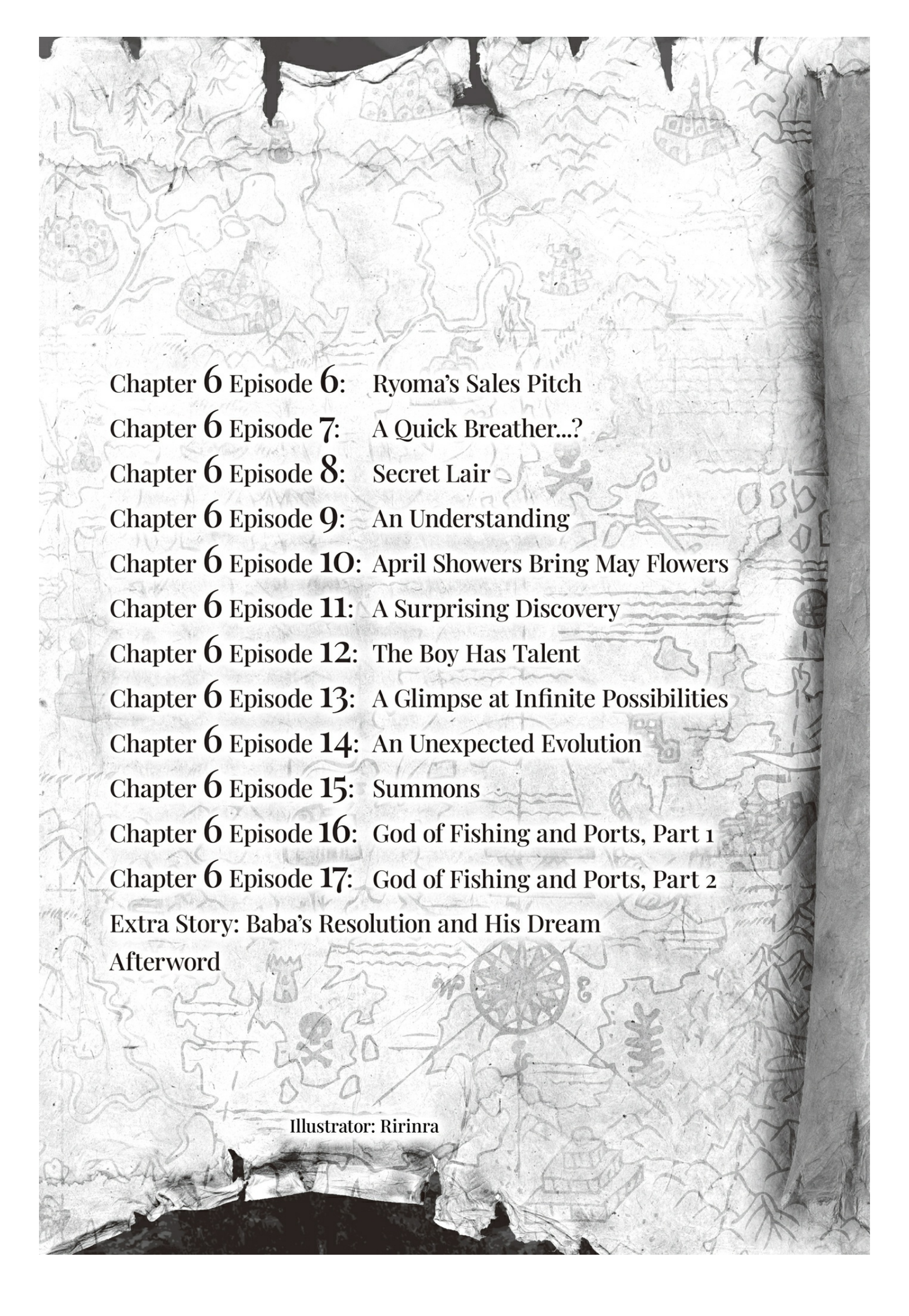
**“I usually
don’t really talk
to humans...
.. But I’ve very
much wanted
to meet you.”**

**He smiled
while floating
in the water,
the edges of his
garb fluttering
like tail fins.**

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Illustrator: Ririnra

Chapter 5 Episode 29: The Pre-Ceremony Feast and Reminiscence

Thanks to the army of slimes working overtime, the lake was now filled with crystal-clear water. Since the water gate had to be closed to drain the lake entirely, its water level was still lower than before, but it seemed like the lake would return to normal by morning. There wasn't really a need to watch it anymore, but I was standing there all the same, watching the lake refill. The night was a bit chilly, especially by the water, but it felt nice after a good day's work. Meanwhile, the maids who had been setting up the wedding venue started to return to the manor.

"And then there were none... I remember reading that book." The book, of course, was a murder mystery and not nearly as quaint as my own situation. As my mind began to wander, four sets of footsteps approached me from the direction of the manor.

"Hey, Ryoma!"

"Hughes! And Jill, Camil, and Zeph too."

The familiar quartet of guards came bearing pleasant-smelling baskets and cases of bottles.

"What's all that for?" I asked.

"Supper. We decided to dine with you, since it's the night before the ceremony and all." Traditionally, the bride and groom would spend the day dining and talking with their families, but Hughes had already lost both of his parents.

"Not that you'd be filling in for my dad or anything, but I wouldn't even be here today if not for you. Besides, you couldn't come with us yesterday. What do you say? How's a drink or two under the stars sound?"

I felt honored that he'd choose me as a drinking buddy for such an important occasion.

“I’d love to.”

“Now we’re talking!”

“Let’s get things started, then. Camil. Zeph,” called Jill.

“We brought a table and a set of chairs. Here.”

“I’ll set up a barrier against the cold,” I offered. “And I’ll bring out a few slimes as well, so please pass them any trash.”

We each took on a set of tasks for a few minutes, and soon we had ourselves warm stew and loaves of bread, as well as a pot full of melted cheese for fondue atop a portable stove magical item. The rest of the table was filled with snacks and finger food to go with drinks.

“Right, a toast to Hughes’s marriage-to-be! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Glasses were raised in jubilation. I tipped mine back, and a rich aroma rushed through my nose.

“Mm! Now this is some fine stuff!”

“You brought the drinks, didn’t you, Jill? Weren’t these expensive?”

“We don’t have an occasion like this to celebrate every day; there’s no harm in spoiling ourselves a little.”

“You’re right about that, but I would have brought some better snacks if I knew I’d be pairing them with this.”

The four of them continued their conversation, and I realized that I had never asked about how they came to know each other. They did seem closer than mere coworkers.

“How long have you been working together?” I asked.

“Hm? For about ten years now. Jill already worked for the duke, while Zeph, Camil, and I joined the security team out of adventuring. It all started on our first day... The three of us were hired at the same time, and Jill was our trainer.”

“Really now...”

“Dealing with Camil and Zeph was one thing,” Jill chimed in. “But Hughes put me through the wringer. Sure, he could take care of himself in combat, but he didn’t even try to hide how much he hated rules and formalities. He couldn’t even muster up the bare minimum of etiquette to deal with nobles.”

“I remember you made it your life’s mission to fix that, Jill.”

“Even security has to appear at the front-of-house when there are guests sometimes. If something goes wrong, it will tarnish the duke’s name.”

“I remember all of the shouting like it was yesterday... ‘In case you’ve lost your bearing, you are trying to *work* for a noble!’ Among other things.”

“I couldn’t for the life of me understand why you decided to apply, or why Duke Reinhart decided to hire you.”

“Well, why did you?” I asked the man of the hour.

He thought about it for a bit. “Back then...” he started, and went on to tell us how he was raised as the first-born to some farmers; dreading a life of working in the fields, he left home at a young age to become an adventurer and test his mettle. “I struggled at first, but I started making a more stable living, and made it to B-rank. I wouldn’t have minded staying an adventurer... But more and more of my buddies started to quit once they reached B, saying that they were getting too old for the work, or they’d saved up enough to live a safe and normal life. None of the parties I joined lasted too long because of that. That’s when I met the duke and duchess.”

“I’ve heard they were adventurers back in the day.”

“Yeah, they were in a B-rank party too. They kept their titles a secret while they were working, but they couldn’t keep this sort of elegance a secret, I guess. Some guessed they were nobles, but everyone knew they were loaded.”

Amused, Hughes told us how badly they stuck out in the guild. “I just thought they were a couple of weirdos at first. But then, there was this big quest that hired all the high-ranking adventurers, and I was thrown into a makeshift party to join the fray. Our coordination was nonexistent, so we didn’t make it. Everyone in the party but me was hurt so badly that they were incapacitated. I thought we were done for, when the duke and duchess showed up and saved

our hides. It started with me trying to repay the favor somehow, and we just got along naturally, so we ended up working together.”

“I got to know them through that big quest too.”

“Really, Zeph? What about you, Camil?”

“Well, I...”

“Camil came into the picture a little bit after us. He was good at magic, but kind of sucked at everything else. We had to take care of him this one time...”

“Wha—Okay, Ryoma, don’t let him twist this. By ‘kind of sucked,’ he just means *average*. I just didn’t get to the top-tier B-rank like *these people*.”

“If you say so.” Hughes chuckled.

“Camil is well-versed enough in magic to deal with various situations. Even without the duke’s recommendation, he would have never become a guard if his abilities were insufficient,” Jill said, apparently to Camil’s relief.

Now I get it. While the four of them seemed close, Camil always seemed to be at the bottom of the metaphorical totem pole; it all made sense now.

“I bet we could have gone for A-rank... But their time was up,” Hughes said. “That was when the duke and duchess came clean with us. They told us who they were, and how they had to get married and inherit the dukedom.”

“That was quite the surprise... Not that we ever doubted those lovebirds would get married, nor that they were nobles.”

“But no one expected to find the future Duke and his fiancée at the Adventurer’s Guild!”

“You can say that again,” Hughes chimed in. “Of course, then the conversation turned to what we were going to do with *our* lives, you know? So they gave us all an offer, and told us we were trustworthy and that they knew we could handle ourselves. To be honest, I needed to mull over it a bit. But I didn’t expect to find a party as good as ours again, and besides, how often does a lowly adventurer get to see the duke? Worst case scenario, I’d never see them again, and just as we were starting to get along. Didn’t feel like it was the right time for goodbyes, you know...?”

That ended up pushing Hughes to accept, under the conclusion that it would have been easier to have a job working for the duke and quitting than trying to get one. “And since that was my motive, Jill and I ended up butting heads, to say the least.”

“What did you expect?! Serving a noble, especially in a position as close as a guard, demands loyalty! When I was allowed to work here, I resolved to devote my life to the service of...” Perhaps with the help of some liquid encouragement, Jill began harping on Hughes about it, prompting the other two to intervene.

Our night thickened with conversation, as Hughes began sharing aspects of marriage that he had been nervous about, but unable to bring up until now. I didn’t have much advice to give, as I hadn’t married once over *two* lifetimes, but I tried my best to console him.

Eventually, everyone but me completely crashed. “Hello... Are the lights still on? Is anyone home?” No response.

“Uh... A little help would be nice!” I called.

After a few seconds, a woman responded from behind me, where nobody else should have been.

“May I be of service?” I heard someone approach me, the grass crunching under their feet.

Chapter 5 Episode 30: Reunion under the Moonlight

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Just a maid. I was assigned to care for you." A woman in a maid's uniform appeared, her straight black hair glimmering in the moonlight. Despite having emerged from the woods in the opposite direction of the paved venue, she had declared her identity with a straight face.

The fact that she was hiding in the woods was suspicious enough, but...

"I've never seen you before."

"The duke's manor is quite expansive. That shouldn't be a cause for concern."

"The duke may have staff I've never seen, but you're no maid."

With some exceptions, like the younger girls the other day who had been temporary hires, I had been told that maids allowed to show themselves to the duke's guests had all gone through appropriate training. In fact, Araune the housekeeper, Lulunese, and Libiola had all treated me with refined etiquette. On the other hand, the woman who had just shown herself had not so much as given me a proper introduction or a bow. Not that I expected the staff to always bow to me... But she even retorted at me combatively when I said that I had never seen her before. Nothing about her demeanor seemed maidly. What's more, she didn't even seem convinced I would buy her story.

"What could I possibly be, if not a maid?" she demanded.

"A brownie."

She didn't deny it, and a smile crossed her face... Well, more of a smirk, but it seemed like I'd hit the mark.

"When did you notice me?"

"I've sensed your presence from the beginning." I was trying not to worry about it since I'd heard about brownies before, but the sensation was unmistakable. I had felt it so many times. Still, I would have never expected a

brownie to show itself.

“I thought people were acting a bit weird... No wonder.”

Our conversations were natural, but I hadn't been told anything about eating out here beforehand, while my four friends came out with food and drink like we had planned the whole thing together. Why did we have to eat outside, anyway? No one ever suggested going inside, nor did any member of the staff come to retrieve me. The fact that everyone here had always been so attentive helped me come to that realization.

“So, you decided to eat and drink things brought by people who you thought were acting completely beside themselves?”

“I did make sure the food wasn't drugged or poisoned when I brought out the slimes while we were getting ready.” When I called out a bunch of scavengers from Dimension Home, I had brought out a medicine and poison slime along with them. “Poison slimes and medicine slimes really like poisons and drugs, respectively. I figured the food was safe when neither of them showed any interest in it.” I never felt a sense of danger then, and I didn't feel one now. That was just a precaution. The quote-unquote “*maid*” simply nodded along at my explanation.

“I didn't think you used any appraisal magic. Now that makes sense,” she said.

“For an idea I came up with on the fly, I thought it was pretty good myself. Heck, it might be worth doing further research into. I could probably teach slimes to detect drugs and poisons.”

“You may find demand for that in noble society... But I'd rather not get into discussing slimes with you. We'd be here all night otherwise.”

That comment only made me want to talk about them more, but I swallowed that urge. “So, *are* you a brownie?”

“Close, but no cigar. The people of this manor do call me a brownie, but I am technically a fairy that lives in the manor.”

She quite easily admitted that she was a fairy, so I doubt she was really trying to hide her identity. But it made me think of another question.

“What’s the difference between fairies and brownies?”

“We are born in a similar way, but brownies and other fairies that occupy inanimate objects are closer to undead monsters. They just happen to benefit humans.”

She went on to explain thoroughly how fairies are corporeal beings born of magical energy abundant in nature.

Generally speaking, fairies were innocent and free-spirited. They mostly preferred to live where they were born, but there were some rare exceptions who traveled far out of curiosity or wandered into a human city. Fairies looked like adorable, tiny people, but wielded powerful elemental magic. Brownies (or any fairies that occupied objects) were born from magical energy and thoughts that had slowly seeped into the house or object from its inhabitants or users. They lacked physical bodies for the most part, and couldn’t wander too far away from their own house or object. Their nature was strongly dependent on the mentality of their human inhabitants or users; they could be helpful or harmful to humans.

In Japan, Shinto has a similar concept. The most significant transference of magical energy and thought occurred at the moment of that person’s death, and was the cause of undead monsters like zombies or walking skeletons. Judging from the way she spoke, fairies apparently didn’t like to be conflated with brownies.

“Now, I know I’ve already said this,” she added, “but I *am* a fairy. I was born from natural magic in a forest somewhere.”

“I see... I’ve heard of fairies before, but I never thought I’d meet one.”

At the same time, I assumed that her explanation was a generalization of fairies, seeing how the woman before me was full-sized, and seemed more thoughtful than innocent. Moreover, she was undoubtedly the one who manufactured my current situation. From how she spoke of the manor, it didn’t seem like she had signed a contract with anyone there. She may have some hypnosis-like power that manipulates people. Some fairies, from my impression of them on Earth, certainly manipulated people. The fact that she was completely in human-form and seemed rather intelligent made me think that

she was an advanced species of fairies.

“So, what does a fairy like you want from me?”

“I never intended to show myself to you... But I do have a question.” I waited for her to continue, and she asked, “Do you need help with anything?”

“Help?”

“More specifically, is there anything that’s troubling you?”

“I don’t think so...” Well, aside from her catching me off-guard with that question, that is.

“There must be something troubling you. Getting used to life in this world, for example.”

“Nah, I’m pretty—Wait, what did you say?”

This world. I heard her say that loud and clear. My ears weren’t just playing tricks on me. While I still didn’t feel any sense of danger, I couldn’t help but raise my guard.

“Hm? Why do you... Oh.” She nodded with understanding after a moment of confusion. “I suppose I haven’t told you. It slipped my mind, since I hadn’t planned on seeing you... My name is Yui. I used to be a familiar to Shiho, who came from Earth, just like you.”

Shiho Jamil... A person from Earth, the ancestor to the duke, and the founder of familiar magic. Could it be that the woman before me was really her familiar? Now that she mentioned it, she seemed more Japanese than anyone I had seen in this world—her black hair, black eyes, and her facial features... It was a shock at first, but I supposed there was no reason for her to lie.

“Before her death, Shiho left two instructions for me. The first was to watch over her children and descendants as much as I could. The other was to subtly assist the next person who would come from Earth. Shiho was a kind girl. While this was partly brought on by her own recklessness, she was often troubled by aspects of life in this world. I suspect that was why she had asked me to help the next Earthling in any small way I could. Fairies can live for hundreds of years, as long as we’re not killed. Having known Shiho, I could tell at once that

you were also from Earth.”

“So that’s why you asked if anything was bothering me.”

“I didn’t intend for our conversation to last this long.” She then confirmed that she did possess hypnosis-like powers, and had planned to sneak into my bedroom and force me to divulge my troubles that way before giving me any solution she could think of, and blurring my memory to make it seem like a dream. “But, although you are a human, my powers don’t seem to work on you. As a result, I was forced to show myself. I was told that people from Earth are given some powers by the gods. Is that why you were unaffected by me?”

“Unaffected? Oh, sorry, that’s all me. Apparently I’m super resilient to mind games like that.”

“Is that so...?” she quietly said, visibly offended. I guess it really did matter that much to her.

She went on to confess that she had used the four people close to me to try and get me to spill what was bothering me. Then she told me that she had also manipulated Hughes to divulge what was troubling him, which had led to our conversations mostly revolving around him. She barely heard me talk about myself all night...

“Why did you want to hear Hughes talk about his troubles?”

“Huh? Oh... Just out of personal curiosity. It’s not uncommon for me to discover a couple in the making under the roof of the manor, when you’ve lived there as long as I have. I like to *nudge* them a bit from the shadows, setting the mood or causing ice-breaking coincidences with my powers, and giving subtle hints if it’s a matter of shyness. Oh, but I would never manipulate anyone into it, of course. I just encourage them to pursue their feelings. If all goes well, I would watch over them until they get married. It’s a hobby of mine.”

“What kind of kibitzing spinster are you?!”

“I strongly resent that. At any rate, this shall be couple number 1032 to be wed under my guidance. Though if I’m to include couples who have made it to courting, the number would be at least five times higher. I’ve been told my name means ‘to tie the knot’ in Japanese. Yui the Matchmaker, that’s me.”

“That’s a self-proclaimed title, I’m guessing. I don’t know how long you’ve lived in the manor, but have you really been providing your, uh, *guidance* for hundreds of years without anyone knowing?”

“Would you be able to survive for centuries without any entertainment? Food may be easy to come by here, but all work and no play, as they say. Besides, I’ve honestly never liked any human other than Shiho. They usually enslave and sell off our kind.”

As she had just explained, fairies were famously adept at magic and possessed great magical energy, and looked adorable to boot. They had a high-purity magic crystal in their hearts, born from their raw magical energy. As a result, they were of great use to humans, whether in combat, in the sheets, or in the ground after harvesting their magic crystal. Ever since olden days, there were plenty of people who were willing and eager to catch and sell fairies.

“I thought all humans were against our kind at first, but luckily for me, Shiho was the one who bought me. I don’t hold a grudge against those who enslaved or sold me, since they’re long dead... But I prefer to avoid the human gaze whenever possible. On the other hand, Shiho wouldn’t want me to hurt anyone for my entertainment, so I thought I could at least provide some encouragement to budding couples and see how they turn out. In a way, I’m making these humans dance in the palm of my hands.”



“One could say so.”

“Incidentally, my very first matchmaking involved Shiho. She was just an ordinary commoner at the time, and I protected her from nobles who took notice of her abilities, all the while encouraging her grand romance with her colleague and sponsor for her familiar’s magic research. I pulled all sorts of tricks to make the marriage happen, down to having a noble adopt her to make it more acceptable... That marriage was quite a big win for the team.”

It was an intriguing story and all, but I still wasn’t sure how much of it was true. For all I knew, this really was a precious memory to her, but how was I supposed to react to this monologue?

“Oh? It seems you’ve managed to drag *that* story out of me.”

“I didn’t even do anything...”

She cleared her throat. “Well, never mind that. It’s about time you told me what’s bothering you, don’t you think?”

“We’re circling back to that...? I’ve told you already, I’m good. I’ve always been happy in this world. There’s nothing I want to do that would require your assistance.” *Can I at least take a rain check here?*

I asked, and she almost scowled. “I’m already averse to showing myself, and I’d rather it didn’t happen again.”

“Really now? Well, I call shenanigans. Weren’t you the one who approached me?”

“Fairies are self-centered by nature, don’t you know? There are things in this world that entertain me or mean a lot to me, and things I could not care less about. Right now, I just want to honor Shiho’s wishes. I’ve grown some patience over my centuries of existence, but I don’t want you coming crying to me to fix every little thing. In purely personal terms, I don’t like you at all.”

“Little miss subtlety over here.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” she declared, almost with pride.

This was our first meeting (as far as I knew), after all. I wish we could have become friendly, but I could see how she wouldn’t want someone with whom

she wasn't close following her around. She seemed to have her reasons, so I couldn't argue with her when she was this clear about not wanting to build relationships with people. I was thinking along similar lines when I was a forest hermit, so I decided not to push it. Her bluntness was kind of refreshing, anyway.

At any rate, now I *definitely* had no problems at hand, with the possible exception of my drunken friends surrounding us... Oh, crap!

"I *completely* forgot..."

"Sounds like you might need help with something."

"I don't have a wedding gift... I meant to pick out something good, and it slipped my mind."

"And *that* can't be your wedding gift? I can't think of anything better." She pointed to the venue, and the altar and three divine statues within.

"That's neither here nor there. I didn't build the venue myself; I had a lot of help. As for the statues, those were paid commissions."

"I don't think anyone would expect anything on top of them from you... But if that's how you feel, there won't be harm in another gift. Still, aren't wedding gifts rather run of the mill...? I've seen my fair share of wedding ceremonies."

"Then, from your experience, what's something that would make an appropriate wedding gift which won't put too much pressure on them? Preferably something *less* run of the mill."

"Let's see... Hold on, are you sure this is what you want me to help you with? I told you this was going to be a one-time deal."

"Yes, absolutely! This is my biggest concern right now!"

Night had already fallen. If I was going to buy something, I had to do it early the next morning. What was the best gift I could get in my situation?

"I see... This is hardly what I expected, but that's fine. As a professional matchmaker, on the names of the 1000-plus couples whom I have helped happily marry, I will enlighten you with a gift that you can prepare in time for the ceremony that should be greatly appreciated by the couple."

“Really?!”

“Yes. Lend me your ear. Why not try making...”

I couldn’t believe what she had whispered to me. “Seriously? For a *wedding* gift?” I asked, just to be sure.

“I wouldn’t advise it under normal circumstances, but you do have a special ingredient for it; something you’ve brought in. I already saw the leftovers.”

“Are you talking about...?”

“Etiquette is a fickle mistress; she changes form according to her company. At the end of the day, the best gifts are those appreciated by the receiver. If you’re still worried about it, when you give it to them, just say...”

And so, the fairy who claimed to be the former familiar of the One Who Came Before bestowed upon me the ultimate gift-giving tip. I was taken aback when I was *demand*ed to make a wish, but it did remind me of something important, so I’d call it a win...

But enough of that, I need to get to work! I had no time to waste if I was going to make this gift something I could be proud of.

On my way back to my room, I asked some workers passing by to tend to my drunken friends.

Chapter 5 Episode 31: The Wedding, Part 1

The next day...

“Hey! Are the bride and groom ready?!”

“They’re standing by, all ready to go!”

“We don’t have enough bags of petals!”

“We moved them yesterday! Go check!”

“Eighty percent of the meals are plated!”

“Most of the morning guests are already here!”

“We’ve got less than twenty minutes! Move, move, move!”

People were running all through the manor right from the wee small hours, and the chaos only intensified as the beginning of the ceremony drew nearer.

Meanwhile, I was walking out to the venue in my suit. Luckily, the sun was out in the clear sky, beaming rays warmer than the season warranted. Coming through the woods along its path, I could see a large congregation at the venue. As I approached the structure we’d all built together, I felt a presence of magic, and the change in the temperature. I had been told that volunteers were putting up magical barriers against rain and cold for the outdoor reception.

When I say “volunteers,” I mean members of the duke’s guards; they specialized in setting up defensive barriers around the manor, so they knew what they were doing. Naturally, their barriers were high-caliber and covered a large area. I could use some barrier magic myself, but experiencing the effect up close made me realize how much more effective the magic was when cast by a group rather than an individual.

“Ten minutes, people!”

Looked like I was running out of time to admire magic spells. I weaved through the moving crowd towards the altar.

“Ryoma!”

“Phew, you made it.”

“We were worried something might have happened to you.”

Camil, Jill, and Zeph were waiting for me there, along with the duke and duchess, Araune the housekeeper and Bahtz the head chef. The eight of us, four on each side of the altar, served as the wedding party. I was quite shocked to hear that I was included in said wedding party just that morning. *Good thing I had a proper suit to wear... And a cleaner slime handy.*

“Hm...” Jill muttered. “The ceremony’s starting.”

The bell situated across the venue from us let out a singular toll, causing the guests to quiet down, and part down the middle to form the aisle. The bell tolled again. An elderly man emerged from the woods, clad in a white robe and leaning on a cane. He was the officiant for the ceremony, the eldest gentleman in the duke’s manor.

Wedding ceremonies in this world were served to seek the approval of the gods, where the bride and groom stood before a witness and declared their sincere love and commitment for each other. Said witness did not need to be a clergyman; it could be anyone with high status in the community, like the village leader, a prominent blacksmith, or simply a respected elder.

The officiant for this ceremony was apparently an elf, and a *spry* 198 years young. He was also the duke’s medicinal technician, as well as a well-learned scholar in many fields of academia, serving as advisor to various departments.

He made his way up to the altar, accompanied by an assistant who looked ready to catch him if he should fall. We exchanged polite nods as he passed us and situated in the center of the altar.

Once he was presented with the bride and groom’s status boards, he announced, “We shall now commence the matrimony between Hughes and Lulunese.” Although he didn’t speak loudly, the elf’s deep voice carried across the venue. “The bride and groom will approach, with the blessing of those in attendance.”

The ceremony began with the bride and groom’s procession.

Jill chuckled. "What is he doing...?"

"Hughes is terribly nervous, isn't he?"

"He's so stiff."

"The guests see it too. They're trying not to laugh."

Hughes had entered first, greeted by applause and petal tosses from the crowd. He was wearing a tailored tuxedo-like garment I'd never seen before. As he approached the altar alone, he continued to resemble a robot that needed some oil in its joints. Was he getting...stage fright? Hughes eventually stopped just short of the steps to the altar, and turned around.

Then, Lulunese came out of the woods, step by step, her pearl-white wedding dress fluttering in the wind. She too looked nervous as she walked towards her soon-to-be husband. They took each other's hands and climbed up to the altar, their arms linked.

I heard a snuffle, and turned to see that Araune had begun to tear up, supported by Bahtz who seemed to be fighting back tears himself.

"Many years ago, there was nothingness in the world... Then, the gods created the heavens and the earth, the sun and the moon, the light and the darkness."

The officiant began telling the story of creation, a part of the church's teaching and a tale that everyone in this world must have heard at some point. Eventually, he transitioned to the main event of the ceremony.

"Hughes, do you take Lulunese to be your wife, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part, and pledge your heart to her...? Do you swear it before the gods?"

"I do."

"Lulunese, do you take Hughes to be your husband, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part, and pledge your heart to him...? Do you swear it before the gods?"

"I do."

"Very well. I, Araflal, stand witness to your pledges. The gods have approved

the union of..."

Wait, what?

Araflal the officiant was standing there, frozen. At this point in the ceremony, the couple should have gained new titles on their status boards: "Married" and "Wife/Husband of (Insert Name Here)." These titles served as proof that the gods approved of the wedding, legitimizing the entire union.

The seconds ticked by, but Araflal remained immobile, save for his eyes which kept darting back and forth between the two status boards... This didn't look good.

"I wonder what's happened?"

"The titles didn't appear? That can't be... Could it be that the gods didn't approve...?"

"That's ridiculous. I've heard of a story where a fake groom was apprehended when the title on his status board betrayed him, but that was a rare fluke. And come on, this is Hughes we're talking about..." Jill rambled, clearly unnerved.

Could it be that the titles hadn't appeared? Had some more worrying titles appeared in their place? Seeing how Araflal kept staring at the boards, I was starting to become convinced of the latter. At the very least, it didn't seem like his vision had weakened from his age.

Just say something already!

"Hm?" As if my silent plea (or the increasing whispers of the guests) had been heard, Araflal finally looked up. "Um. Excuse me, everyone... No need to worry. The gods *do* approve of their marriage!" Relief spread through the venue, and I was left wondering what he had been staring at.

"In fact..." he declared, "they have both received a blessing from the trinity of the gods. This is an occurrence I have not witnessed often in my many, many years of life. I sincerely hope that the bride and groom remain faithful to their pledges and the gods, and that they will build a wonderful family together." Araflal made quite the smooth transition from explaining the delay to the usual course of the wedding.

It seemed that I was the only one who clued in to the gravity of what he had said, since I was familiar with those gods. The “Trinity” in this scenario might have been Kufo, Lulutia, and Wilieris, to whom I had dedicated those statues.

“Whoever it was, they were watching...”

The guests slowly thawed out of their shock, beginning to boil with cheers that soon culminated in an eruption of exuberance. The happy couple embraced, albeit a bit taken aback by the roaring congratulations from the crowd before them. At this rate, the reception was going to be a party to remember.

“Hey, can you believe that? The gods have *blessed* us, he said,” Hughes said.

“Yes... I suppose we were meant to be together.”

The bride and the groom whispered to each other, almost crying tears of joy. The blessing was a surprise, but it helped make the ceremony a memorable one. I was incredibly happy for them... And only slightly concerned about the reception later on.

Chapter 5 Episode 32: The Wedding, Part 2

“That was quite the fiasco...”

The ceremony had concluded with the crowd going wild at the surprise wedding gift from the gods. The rest of the wedding party and I followed the newlyweds off of the altar and straight into the revelrous reception...and I promptly got lost in the sea of people. I was taken far away from the bride and groom as though it were on the wings of a bird, where I was overwhelmed by all the guests who couldn't get any closer to the couple, all of them ecstatic that the happy couple had just been blessed by the gods.

The wedding guests, nearly delirious with excitement, raved about everything that could have possibly pleased the gods: the bride and groom themselves, the wedding gown, the decorations, the food... The storm of praise even reached me, once they found out I'd built the statues and oversaw the construction of the altar. It drained me a bit, since I couldn't quite get as excited about it all as an ex-Japanese man without much religion in my life or culture (though I believed in the gods now, of course).

In any case...

“Thanks for the help,” I said.

“No need to thank me for that. I just happened to be on my way back from picking up some food and ran into you.”

I wasn't about to disbelieve her either. The self-proclaimed matchmaker, Yui the fairy, ended up rescuing me from the avalanche of people. Like a seasoned waitress, she was carrying five dishes in total, with both palms, both forearms, and even the top of her head occupied with one large dish piled high with food apiece. She set the plates down on a mysteriously unoccupied table, took a seat, and began to dig in. There were other people around, but they seemed completely uninterested in us, which I attributed to what must have been her power. When I concentrated, I could sense something similar to a Conceal barrier... Though it was so faint that I would have never noticed without

suspecting its existence.

“Why don’t you take a seat until the commotion settles?” she offered.

“Sure, if you don’t mind.”

I took the chair across the table from her. “Is it rare for the couple to receive a blessing from the gods like that?”

“Rare, and quite honorable, but not unheard of. It’s happened to some of the couples I’ve set up, but the last one was thirty years ago. Of course, I can’t speak to the percentage of couples who receive it on a worldwide scale... What’s surprising is the number of blessings they’ve received.”

“So it’s more than usual, then?”

“As far as I know, most couples receive none, and the ones who do usually just receive one. But our couple... I sneaked over and asked. Both of them were blessed by Lulutia, the groom by Kufo and Tekun, and the bride by Wilieris and Gain. That’s five blessings *in toto*,” the fairy explained in detail, being aware of my Japanese origins.

So they got blessings from more than just the ones I made statues of?!

Yui sneered at me. “What’s with that smug look? That wasn’t your handiwork, was it?”

“I didn’t do anything myself, but I have a bit of a hunch about why we had such a glut of blessings this time... Since you were a familiar to my predecessor, I feel like I can trust you. I’ve had the opportunity to speak to the gods, using my Oracle skill; they do watch our kind from time to time. They may be watching to see if we’re getting along in the new world, or because something about us caught their interest, or maybe to make sure we don’t abuse the powers they’ve given us for evil.”

“I see. So they had their eyes on you, and the wedding was like a free bonus, so to speak.”

“I believe so.” *If Tekun’s there, they’re definitely drinking it up in the divine realm, and I could easily imagine Kufo and Gain handing out blessings like candy... Besides, humans seem to take those blessings much more seriously than*

the gods ever do.

“You seem very close to them.”

“I always make an effort to talk with them whenever I’m visiting a chapel.”

“I wouldn’t say that around most people if I were you. Especially not clergymen. It’s my understanding that they spend years in training only to receive a few short words from the gods once in a while. They may not believe you and deem you a liar, and they would be more than jealous if they believed you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. In fact, I’d appreciate it if we just kept that info between us.” Plus, I sure as hell wasn’t going to mention that the gods and I would drink copiously whenever we met up!

Speaking of, I realized that the self-proclaimed matchmaker fairy had cleaned two of her large plates during our conversation.

“Did you want some...?” she asked, giving me a threatening stare.

“No, I’m just impressed by your appetite. I never imagined fairies to be big eaters.”

“Most fairies are smaller than me, after all.”

“Speaking of, you look indistinguishable from any person. Some form of transfiguration, I’m guessing?”

“You Earthlings are a sharp bunch. Not that I’ve met anyone from Earth other than Shiho and you, but still... I’m a bit smaller than I appear, but I can blur that line with my powers, and this makes it a lot easier for me to blend in with people. Not very fuel-efficient, though.”

“I see. If you don’t mind me asking, what kind of food do you like?”

“I’ve lived here for so long that I rarely eat anything raw. When living in nature, your choices are decidedly limited. Most of us prefer nuts, fruit, flower nectar and honey. Some fairies like to eat more unconventional things, but that all depends on the individual, just like with humans. At any rate, fairies can survive without eating, as long as we have magical energy from nature. Any other food or drink is for enjoyment more than nourishment. Our bodies *can*

convert them to energy, of course.”

“Well, that explains a lot. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome... Incidentally, did you finish the gift we spoke of?”

“I did. I wouldn’t say it was smooth sailing all the way, but I’m happy with how it turned out.”

“Very good to hear. It seems my suggestion wasn’t wasted on you.”

At that moment...

“Ryoma?”

“I wonder where he went...”

I heard Reinhart and Elise calling from somewhere behind me. I turned to find them weaving through the crowd, apparently looking for me.

“Looks like I’m wanted. I’d better get going now, Yui.”

“Sure. I doubt you’ll get swallowed by the crowd again if you’re with them.”

“Thanks again.”

“I’m looking forward to watching them receive your gift.”

I parted with Yui and joined the duke and duchess. They hadn’t given the newlyweds their gift yet either. I produced my gift from the Item Box, and we joined the line of gift-givers. But since the manor workers in the line kept letting us cut in front of them, we hardly had to wait until we were at the front of the line, just in time to see Bahtz, the head chef, hand Lulunese a box and a plated slice of cake.

“This brings back memories...”

“My lamon cake. I baked you one when I was just a sous-chef. You wouldn’t stop nattering about how much you enjoyed it.”

“I loved that cake, but this is even better.”

“Naturally! I haven’t honed my skills to become head chef for nothing, after all. I thought you might have liked the old recipe, but I couldn’t resist the chance to try to one-up myself.”

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Bahtz. This one is wonderful too. It's so fluffy."

"Oh, Ryoma gave me new ingredients for that just the other day. I couldn't wait to try it."

Elise turned her head to me. "You gave him advice, Ryoma?"

"I wouldn't quite call it advice. Maybe small talk is more accurate... Remember the bath bomb I made you, Ma'am? All the ingredients are actually edible. I told Bahtz that they could also be used to make cake sponges fluffier." I had given him leftover ingredients as well, but I didn't expect him to have already made use of said ingredients.

Then Bahtz seemed to notice us, and said, "Well, I'll see you later. There's plenty more where that came from in the box, so please enjoy it, both of you. And Hughes, you take good care of her..."

"Thank you."

"You bet," Hughes answered.

As Bahtz retreated into the group of onlookers, his gift was handed off to a maid; she seemed to be in charge of storing the gifts.

Then, I gestured to the duke and duchess. "After you."

They stepped forward. "Congratulations, Hughes and Lulunese."

"Thank you, Your Grace," the newlyweds answered in unison.

"What's the matter, Hughes? You're not acting like yourself."

"Heh, just thought I'd be a bit more *official*, y'know?"

"I can hardly blame you, though it just looks weird to me... I have something to give you, from the two of us." Reinhart handed Hughes the expensive-looking wooden box he had been carrying, which the groom opened immediately.

"Oh, my!" Lulunese exclaimed.

"A suit of armor...made from dragon scales?!"

"My father's familiar had just shed its scales, so I put them to use. I expect many more years of work from you, Hughes, and now you have Lulunese to

think about as well; with that in mind, we wanted to do everything we can to make sure you come back from dangerous jobs. Besides, you'll need to stand out once you're promoted."

"Wow... Thank you," Hughes said. "I'll make it worth your while in the field."

"I'm looking forward to it. Lulunese, keep an eye on Hughes, would you? He's acting all stoic now, but he doesn't always watch where he steps."

"Yes, Your Grace. I will always support my husband to the best of my ability, and be the best maid I can be in your service."

"There's nothing to worry about, Lulunese." The duchess smiled. "You've always been of wonderful help to me. And hopefully you will for many years to come."

Tears formed in their eyes, and applause naturally rose from the crowd. Reinhart and Elise decided against prolonging their conversation, and stepped aside to let me through.

"Congratulations, you two."

"Thank you, Master Ryoma."

"You've done so much for us, Ryoma. I can't thank you enough as it is..."

"This is something I wanted to give you." I handed him the wooden box I had produced from the Item Box.

They immediately opened my gift too.

"Oh, my!" Lulunese exclaimed.

"What a beaut! Is it glass?" Hughes took out a pair of drinking glasses, each of translucent red and blue color apiece and etched with intricate patterns of white lines, in the style of the *Edo kiriko*. The crowd fell quiet for a moment, before showing two different reactions.

Part of the crowd seemed genuinely interested in the glassware; this group included Serge and Pioro, along with people whom I assumed weren't so superstitious. The vast majority, and many of them older, looked like they wanted to make a comment; that wasn't too surprising. Just like in Japan, glassware and other breakables were considered bad luck for weddings, since

anything that could cut or break was construed as alluding to the severing of the marriage.

I had expected this, of course, so I produced an additional glass I had prepared from the Item Box.

“Hughes, Lulunese. Have a look at this.”

“Is that another glass?”

“Looks a little wonky, though.”

“Indeed. It’s from one of my failed practice runs before I made those two... Now watch what happens when I do...this!” With that, I threw the practice glass onto the solid brick tiles beneath our feet.



With a *clunk*, the glass bounced a few times without breaking, and rolled towards one of the maids standing nearby.

“Excuse me, but could you get that for us?”

“Oh, right away!”

I thanked the maid as she retrieved the glass for me. “I know it looks like glass, but it’s actually not.”

The material only *looked* like glass; it was actually a kind of hardening sticky solution made into the shape of a cup, which acted like a durable plastic. This was Yui’s grand idea; if breakables were bad luck, then my gift needed to be unbreakable. Accordingly, she got the idea when she saw the faux stained glass windows I had made by coloring the hardening sticky solution. I went to explain my gift to the couple, as Yui had advised.

“Those two are both made of the same material, so they’re quite difficult to break. Unfortunately, nothing man-made can last forever. While they’re very durable, these glasses will eventually lose their shape if you continue to treat them without care or throw them away. But if you use them with care, I believe their brilliance will last you a lifetime. Think of it as a reminder to treat your marriage with the same level of care. May your relationship forever shine as brightly as it does today.”

The crowd stirred in understanding, then erupted in applause.

“Ryoma... Thanks for such a thoughtful gift!” Hughes said.

“I swear, I will keep them nice and shiny,” Lulunese followed, and the bride and groom became teary-eyed again.

Most of the spiel came straight from Yui, but the gift, and the intentions behind it, came straight from my heart. I could not have been happier that I was able to give them something they liked.



Later on...

“Master Ryoma. Have you ever thought about selling those?”

“Hold up, Serge. Glassware’s got plenty to do with my business too. Rich folks are *quite* particular about what they take their food and drink from as well.”

“I’m sorry, both of you, but those take *a lot* of time to make. There’s no way I could dream of putting them on my shop shelves.”

The *Edo kiriko*, as its name suggested, was a traditional art form that originated towards the end of the Edo period. I had made my faux *Edo kiriko* glasses by putting a thin layer of colored hardening sticky solution above clear hardening sticky solution, then etching away the outer layer to draw a pattern using Disc Grinder, a new spell I developed by making Polish Wheel thinner and rounder. I had invented a new magic spell that required more concentration, and slogged through the difficult process of flawlessly carving a pleasing pattern into the glasses. I barely managed to finish the two I gave the couple after spending all night on them. There was no way I could mass-produce them for sale.

“Did you not get any sleep last night, Ryoma?” Reinhart asked.

“Is that why you were swept away by the crowd earlier? I swear, you’re going to work yourself into an early grave...”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Also, Serge, Pioro? I could teach someone how to make them, so outsourcing the production to a glass artist could be a possibility.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” said Serge.

“I wanted to sell them as a wedding gift set, with a card of your pitch in the box... But if they were glass, I don’t think I could make that work.”

The usual four, now very much interested in the faux *Edo kiriko*, continued conversing with me while enjoying the reception to our hearts’ content, giving the newlyweds our biggest congratulations.

Chapter 5 Episode 33: Follow-Up #1—The Gods

Three days after the dazzling ceremony, Fey, myself, and my new employee Ox were all packed to leave the duke's estate for Gimul, to the great disappointment of the duke, duchess, and their staff.

Before we left, though, I visited the divine realm through the church in Gaunago to find...

"Great job down there!"

"We saw the whole thing! What a wonderful ceremony."

"Here, have a drink!"

"We got tons of snacks too! What strikes your fancy?"

"Figures..." I muttered, having encountered Kufo, Lulutia, Tekun, and Gain amidst mountains of food, bottles, and barrels where there should have only been a pure white surface. "The wedding was three days ago. Have you been drinking all this time?"

"Oh? Has it been that long already?"

"We don't really keep track of the time, you know."

"Not like we can drink ourselves under the table! We just do it 'til we get bored!"

"Bwa ha ha! Only three days?!"

"I swear, you four... Where's Wilieris?" I asked. Since Wilieris had blessed the couple at the wedding, I was sure she'd be here.

"Went on vacation with Grimp."

"Grimp... The god of agriculture?"

"Yep. And Wilieris's husband."

"They still dote on each other, after all these years. 'After that lovely wedding,' she said, 'we're going to relive our honeymoon and go tour locales

around the world and check on the crops.”

“Do they have to relive their honeymoon a billion times?!”

“It’s harvest season in Rifall Kingdom where you’re at, Ryoma. Some other countries and continents are sowing their crops as we speak... They might grow exceptionally well this winter and into the spring, what with the goddess of earth and the god of agriculture touring the world and all...”

For all the conversations I’d had with these gods, I was reminded not to regard their actions the way I would those of ordinary humans. I drank from the cup they’d given me, and then Kufo spoke up.

“Wait... Three days? You came through the church in Gaunago, didn’t you? I thought you were leaving after the wedding.”

“That was the plan. But you all blessed the couple at the wedding, remember?”

“Oh yeah! Really livened things up, didn’t we?!”

Tekun was right. It did cause quite a hoo-ha at the wedding, with everyone exclaiming how they’d never seen a more celebrated union. I appreciated their divine gesture and all, but...

I dare say, there was a bit too much life in the party. It was enough how the reception carried on way past the scheduled time. But more crucially, although we were planning on demolishing the venue after the wedding, no one wanted to give any thought to destroying the structure on which the historically blessed marriage took place; that led to talks of reinforcements to make the structure last as long as possible, and I, as the de facto foreman, oversaw the reinforcements to the end. Besides, I had quite a few orders come in after word had spread among the workers of the estate how I’d built those statues.

“Ooh, guess you’ve been pretty busy.”

“I could have turned them all down, but everyone was very nice about it. I got to practice earth magic by mass-producing the statues, and I learned a spell usually used to reinforce mining tracks to bolster the venue. Better yet, I got to talk to a gentleman named Araflal about pharmaceutical methods; he officiated the wedding, actually, and he even gave me some advice. The extension was

definitely worth it.”

“That’s great to hear.”

Speaking of those statues, I wanted to ask them about something: *Divine Statue Master*. “I noticed that title on my status board recently. What’s it mean?”

“Pretty cut and dry, I’d say. We deemed you a master at making our statues.”

“Most of the statues down in your realm are... What do you call them? Fanfics.”

“That’s, uh...an unexpected analogy.”

“You get to meet us and create your statues exactly as you see us. Normally, humans can’t do that. The other statue makers can only draw inspiration from old legends and their imagination. No matter how impressive they may seem to humans, they seem a bit off to us.”

“We used to be closer to humans, so there were more artists who could see us or sense us clearly... Some locales even change our gender, or depict us as non-humans!”

“Sometimes they even depict us as a different god for a different religion. Not that we can do anything about them, but there’re so many statues that just don’t get it right.”

“Not that gender or appearance matters much to gods like us, but we’re in our most natural and comfortable state. No sense in making ourselves match their depiction. And...while we *could* use our powers to do something about them, those statues have too much sway. We could ruin the world if we’re careless, and a couple of inaccurate statues aren’t worth risking the entire world for...”

“I see what you’re saying...” *I suppose even gods have their own stuff to deal with.* “I understand the Statue Master thing now, but do you think it would blow up in my face if people find out about it?”

“Considering the kind of person you are, Ryoma, yes. Master titles are given out when we deem projects to be a certain caliber, so they’re not unheard of.

When the word gets out, everyone from nobles to clergymen want to hire those people.”

“The title is proof that the gods have praised whatever they’re making. If they’re a carpenter or something, they may be recruited to build churches or other religious facilities. You wouldn’t be treated badly, but the Church would want to keep you under their thumb. That could be a big break for normal people, but, well...you know. In any case, no clergyman in their right mind would force you into anything, and you can always turn them down. Even if you draw some unwanted attention, I wouldn’t be worried as long as the duke has your back.”

“I didn’t exactly plan on parading around town with my title, but I’ll be careful.”

“That would be safer. Tekun mentioned that Master titles are granted occasionally, but Divine Statue Master hasn’t been granted in a long time because of the issues we mentioned,” Lulutia lazily added, apparently buzzed. I, on the other hand, was growing more wary of the title.

“Use it well, and it could be a bargaining chip against the Church...given the right opportunity, of course. If you keep your titles a secret, no one should find out which ones you have. No need to be concerned about it too much.”

“You said it,” Tekun chimed in. “Everybody gets a title or two to their name eventually.”

After that advice, I decided not to worry about it, but the conversation so far made it sound like some titles were given to people without a conscious action from the gods. I asked them if this was the case.

“It is. There are two ways for humans to earn titles. One is for us to bestow them directly...”

“And the other is for the human to meet a set of preset requirements. In this case, the title is given out automatically, like a bot account replying to you on social media.”

“Somebody’s in touch with the latest trends, I see...”

“It’s the best comparison I could think of. Most automatically bestowed titles

are common ones. For example, in any wedding, the newlyweds are each given a title as the wife or husband of their partner. That's a lot of weddings every single day, on a global scale. Even us gods can't process them all one by one."

"I used to do them, back in the day. But sometimes I would be late on or miss a couple, and some were forced to separate, people claiming that 'the gods didn't approve of the union.' I just couldn't bear it..."

"I see..." I quietly topped off Lulutia's glass, as she quickly became sullen.

"As the god of skill, I'm more impressed that the people of Earth can not only do what we do, but have even made it so any one of them can do it through the spread of technology," Tekun muttered with an uncharacteristically serious tone and look in his eyes. So he was interested in Earth technology?

Of course, I still had my own questions. "I noticed that marriages are all supposed to be approved by the gods here. Do you have any problems with that? It's hard to wrap my head around it, since marriages are approved through the governments on Earth." I was particularly worried about Hughes and Lulunese, since they had each received three separate blessings.

"No worries. It's always been that way here, so there aren't any problems to speak of."

"People get divorced, don't they?" I asked. "If their marriage doesn't work out, for whatever reason. Would they be excommunicated or anything?"

"Oh, nothing like that. We approve of divorces, just as we do marriages. As the saying goes, 'Repent ye therefore, that your sins may be blotted out.'"

"It's regrettable for any marriage to fail, but that's just how the cookie crumbles. Humans believe that as long as they consider their shortcomings and strive to improve, they aren't going against the gods. Sometimes, the marriage will work out with a little intervention from one of us."

"Noble divorces can affect the reputations of many people involved in the marriage, so most of them simply decide to live in separate houses rather than officially divorce, but commoners get divorced just like they do on Earth."

"I didn't expect that..."

In that case, I wouldn't worry about the possible failure of their marriage; I needed only be happy for them.

"Anyway, let's have another round! Cheers!"

"Oh, yeah! Hand me a barrel!"

"Woo hoo!"

"We gettin' lit!"

"Always the excitable bunch, I see... And what's with the slang, Gain? How do you know so much about Earth culture?"

"We're just a bunch of normal gods having a drink... But I learned quite a lot about Earth through watching Tomochin."

"Who's Tomochin?"

"What?! You're *from* Earth, and you don't even know who Tomochin is?! *The* number-one idol of our times, Tomoko Sukiya?! She started out as the quiet, girl-next-door type. She likes to read manga and draw; she even once wrote fanfic manga with other idols who shared her passion, but now that she's an adult, her agent is pushing a more well-put-together look, forcing her to 'grow out of' her hobby for the most part! What's more, even though the total number of fans have increased with this change, she's heartbroken that her OG fans are losing interest—a twenty-year-old girl who gives off the impression that she works a bit too hard for her own good?!"

"N-Never heard of her..."

I continued to listen to Gain ramble away, but the only piece of information I made out was that she had been in a super famous idol group in Japan; they were around even when I was alive there. Kufo had told me that Gain had gotten hardcore into some idol or something, but I didn't expect it to be *this* hardcore.

"You *lived* in Japan, and you don't even know about her... Ryoma, I am *very* disappointed in you...!"

"Yeesh, overreaction much... One of my old coworkers Tabuchi might have known; he's into more fandoms than I was. I just wasn't interested in idols or

celebrities at all, really. In my past life, I feel like I wasn't interested in people at all..."

Tomochin

SuKiiya



“Well, that’s just sad,” Tekun commented.

It was the truth, though. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have shut myself in a forest for three years the moment I got here. Besides, I was much more social in this world than I ever was on Earth. Plus, I enjoyed it. My own death and reincarnation had changed me quite a bit, it seemed.

“I’m getting to know more and more people in different circles... Including *gods*, no less. It’s hard for me to believe how I left the forest barely even a year ago. Compared to the time I’ve spent outside, the three years I spent in the forest feel like they just flew by.”

If I were a light novel protagonist, I imagine the readers would be complaining to the author about how the plot was moving way too slow right now. I could probably chalk that up to how fulfilling life had become for me by now.

“Oh, right... Got a question for you, Ryoma. Now that you’re meeting new people, expanding your horizons, and all that jazz... Have any fine young ladies caught your eye lately?”

“Ooh! Yes, do tell us!”

“Oh, no, no. Not at all. Well, not yet, anyway...”

I continued to celebrate the happy couple with the gods for all the time allotted to me...though the conversation did take its share of weird detours here and there.

Chapter 5 Episode 34: Follow-Up #2—The Change in Gimul and My Resolution

“Your shop is in this city, Master?” Ox asked.

After leaving the divine realm, I had returned to Gimul accompanied by Fay and now Ox. We powered through the journey with space magic and our above-average stamina and made it here from Gaunago in the record time of two days.

“It is...” I answered with trepidation. “But it seems different than before, somehow. A little louder, maybe? There are more people out and about.”

“Yes, it seems more unruly than before. Probably because of that.” Fay turned back towards the gate we had just passed through, where construction of a new city section was taking place. “More people going in and out means more law-breaking.”

“So it is normally a quieter city, then?” Ox confirmed. “I find this level of activity nostalgic.”

“I’m sure your former residence was quite a bit livelier than this.” He was an ex-gladiator, after all. I was sure that any city with a colosseum was a center for gambling and entertainment; the new district currently being constructed was going to be just that. They had decided to build it separate from the main city to keep the old town safer, but no one could prevent the increase of foot traffic in the city while the district was being built. Upon closer inspection, I could see the city guards making frequent patrols through the streets.

“We should talk to Carme,” I proposed.

“Good idea,” Fay agreed.

Walking slightly faster, we made our way through the streets, which were familiar and yet seemed a bit unfamiliar.

We arrived at the shop. Since customers made a line out onto the street, we entered through the back door, and found Carme frowning at a document, a cup of tea in hand. It didn't exactly look like he was taking a relaxing break.

"Hi, Carme," I called.

"Oh! Welcome back, Boss. And Fay." He must have been too engrossed in the document to notice us when we came in. In any case, Carme looked exhausted. "May I ask who this is...?"

"Pardon me. This is Ox Roade, a former gladiator and level 5 dual blader. He's our new employee and slave."

"I'm sure he'll be a great asset to the shop's protection." Despite the polite remark, I saw Carme shoot a glance at Ox's left wrist—the one devoid of a hand.

"Master has practically given me a new arm already. I *will* earn my keep."

"No sweat," Fay reassured. "I saw first-hand that he's cut out for the job."

"Not sure what you mean by 'a new arm,' but if Fay trusts you, then I trust you. I'm looking forward to us working together."

We were off to a good start, I supposed. Now that introductions were done, I said, "Fay, thank you for guarding us along the way. Please show Ox to the dorm, and orient him on what to expect moving forward. Then get some well-deserved rest."

"Yes, sir."

"Does Ox...?"

"A room has been prepared for him, with a nameplate on the door."

I turned to Ox. "There you have it. We rushed through our journey, Ox, so please get some rest."

"I will."

"Thank you both."

Then, Carme and I moved to the office. "You seemed troubled when we walked in," I started. "What happened here while we were gone?"

“Well... You might have noticed already, but crime has gone up a bit with the influx of laborers. The Merchant’s Guild has provided an advisory. And according to a tip I’ve purchased from a trustworthy source, it’s very likely that some of the labor groups are run by the mafia, so that’s driving crime up further.”

“The mafia...”

“The district they’re constructing now is scheduled to host a colosseum to drive tourism. Which, of course, will generate massive revenue. The mafia must be trying to get their foot in the door so they can be the first to establish profitable businesses. The city guards are aware that the mafia has infiltrated the city, but they’re professional criminals. By day, the families work as a perfectly legal labor agency.”

I see. So they’re front organizations.

“Any damages on our end?” I asked.

“Perhaps an argument or two between a regular and an obstinate customer, but I’ve seen a few people scouting out the place. Mafia or otherwise, there are plenty of people with sticky fingers out there; I was just thinking about ramping up security until things calm down. Roade and his impressive physique will be a deterrent, so I’m glad to have whatever added security we can get.”

I felt like I’d seen his facial expression somewhere before. My office from my previous life in Japan, perhaps... He must have been overworked.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I don’t think you’re lying, but I get the feeling you’re trying to keep something from me.”

“You’re quite a sharp one sometimes, Boss... It’s true that I believe Roade’s physique, along with his aura of a veteran warrior, will become a deterrent for shady business in the shop. However, I couldn’t help wondering whether his missing hand would be a liability. He certainly looked like a competent fighter, but I still have my doubts, all things considered.”

“It’s true that he lost one of his hands. But if you were to see him fight just once, I have no doubt that you’d be as confident about Roade as I am. I didn’t choose him sight unseen, after all... Why don’t I showcase him in front of the

team tomorrow?”

“Splendid. If you two don’t mind, could that be scheduled during peak hours after today?”

Carme explained that he would have some reprieve during peak hours, thanks to the part-timers. Apparently, he saw value in introducing Ox as our new employee and demonstrating exactly how powerful he was, in addition to spreading rumors to discourage anyone from messing with the shop. Carme was really good at this aspect of the job, not that I’d ever felt otherwise.

“My twin sister has always been more skilled than me at running businesses and negotiating. I strove to find what I could excel at, so I started learning how to gather and manipulate information, especially in the dark. Of course, I have what it takes to run a business successfully, if I do say so myself, and my sister has sufficient tools for information management.”

“I have no doubts about that; I feel completely safe leaving the shop with you.” I certainly wouldn’t have left him and the shop if I didn’t feel that way.

“At any rate, I’m glad we haven’t had anything too egregious happen. Let me know if *anyone* tries to cause trouble in the shop, or more importantly, tries to harm any employee, including yourself. If that does happen, or even if you just need an extra pair of hands in combat, then call me straight away. I have a few adventurer contacts who could help us. To be honest, I think I’ll be of greater use when push comes to shove than in any kind of negotiation.”

My hope was that everything could be talked out, but I had to be honest about my abilities. Besides, being too much of a pacifist could result in blowback for us, and my priority was to mitigate the damage or inconvenience caused to us and the shop to a bare minimum. In two weeks’ time, I would head out to Sikum to hunt mad salamanders. Maybe I’d refrain from long trips after that... Well, at least until the new year.

“Oh, right,” I remembered. “I almost forgot to tell you this, but my little introduction to the duke and duchess went better than I could have imagined.”

They had encouraged me to build a branch in Gaunago, since our business was helping to prevent the spread of diseases. They offered to help me buy the land and build the shop there, as well as send some of their maids to help with

any work and teach my employees proper etiquette so that they could serve the nobles of Gaunago. That was generous enough, but Reinhart even dropped the hint to me (quite directly, I might add) that he could also support my endeavor with waste management and fertilizers which I had discussed with him while I was there, or any other venture that benefited the general population.

I parted ways with Serge and Pioro on the understanding that we would continue to help each other out with the waterproof fabric factory and fungi farming respectively. Everything had worked out perfectly.

I explained all of this to try and ease Carme's mind a bit, but...

"Is something the matter?"

Carme looked increasingly concerned. "It's wonderful, and most reassuring, that we are in the duke's good graces... But I can't help feeling a bit of pressure. What if I can't live up to his expectations...? No, I mustn't think this way."

He shook his head, as if to chase the negative thoughts away. "If the duke encouraged us to build a branch in Gaunago, then that settles it. We'll send someone to run the shop, of course, but we should get the rest of the employees hired sooner rather than later."

"Oh, about that..." I produced a booklet from the Item Box.

"Is that from the Moulton Slave Trading Company?"

"I was given this on my way out after purchasing Ox, and there's a section on new businesses."

The booklet, which Orest had handed to me as we practically high-tailed it out of there, outlined a 'staffing' program. Orest had apparently started renting slaves out for short-term work that paid by the hour. Apparently, this arrangement would be a win on three fronts: for customers who needed working hands but couldn't afford to purchase slaves, or only required them for a few months; slaves whose prices were driven up by their debt and wanted their freedom quicker; and slave traders who had to pay for the upkeep of slaves, or may have had slaves who were overvalued. The booklet went into more detail about other secondary benefits for each party. In fact, there was an

enclosed letter celebrating the establishment of the program, after overcoming numerous hurdles—those like me who wondered what the program could offer over hiring workers through a guild; other slave traders denouncing the program as a waste of money compared to selling the slaves; and internal pushback about the risks of the slaves making a run for it. Still, I was considering taking advantage of the program.

“We interviewed a few others before settling on Ox, and while they weren’t up to snuff when compared to him, Fay had determined them competent enough for guarding the shop under normal circumstances. This program may not be a bad idea when it comes to staffing our new branch. It says here that they offer temporary leases, and if we like their work, we can purchase and keep them on as permanent staff.”

Though the line about how “*Your interviewees are available for this program!*” that was included in the letter did make me wonder if I was being strung along...

“They don’t have many clients yet for the new program, and it says that we can negotiate the price and terms if we’re looking for several workers... Moulton’s a bit of a curveball, but I’ve been told his work ethic is excellent.”

“I see. We shall definitely keep that in mind.”

“Thank you. And while we’re on the subject, I was wondering if we could build two branches in Gaunago. I would appreciate it if we have people willing to travel to the shop, but I’m sure some customers would be deterred if they have to walk too far. Gaunago is an even larger city than Gimul, after all.”

“Good point... We’ve just received some new customers because they only decided to come once it became too cold to do their laundry at home.”

“In addition to growing our clientele, I would love to reach a wider demographic of customers in a more convenient way... I considered setting up carriages to collect orders through town, but when taking into account costs of maintaining the horses and carriages, not to mention the risks of misdeliveries or bandits attacking the carriages, I’m not sure that would be worth it. I figured building another branch might be easier.”

Besides, building more branches in a concentrated area would allow us to

gain more shares of the market in that city to the point of dominating it. We were steadily growing our customer base as we were, but if we had intentions of branching out, then surely it was prudent to try and get a monopoly on laundry services in the city. That way, when people wanted clean clothes, they'd come to Bamboo Forest. At the very least, I wanted to make the most of promoting our unique selling point—cleaner slimes.

“Speaking of,” I asked Carme, “do you remember those laundry shops that popped up after they saw our business was growing? I heard that most of them were unable to make a profit and closed down. Are any of them still active?”

“Haven’t heard anything about them lately... Do you want me to look into it?”

“That would be great.”

I had always considered branching out in case my cleaner slime population grew out of control. If any of the copycat laundry shops were run by honest people, I could see the possibility of buying out their shops and having them staff another branch for us. Looking into their current state of affairs couldn’t hurt.

I expressed this idea to Carme, and he asked me to elaborate on branching out and taking control of the market. As someone who’d dreamed in his past life of making it out of that wage cage and starting a business on more than one occasion, I passionately passed on everything I knew...to which Carme returned a shocked look.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“It’s all very interesting... But I can really see you’re putting a lot of effort into this.”

What was that supposed to mean...? *Why do I feel like a bum who just got his first job in years? Did Carme think I wasn’t putting a lot of effort into things until now?* Considering how I left him to run the shop and do some odd tasks here and there... I couldn’t really respond to that.

Now, though, life had returned to Carme’s eyes, driving out the exhausted shadow that had been there when I walked in. He’d looked like an overworked new hire about to have a mental breakdown.

“Thank you again for doing this. Please let me know what you find out,” I reiterated as Carme left the office looking re-energized.

Maybe I ought to put some more work in around here...

Chapter 5 Episode 35: Follow-Up #3—A Little Bit of Growth

Five days had passed since returning to Gimul. Now, I was knocking on the door of the Saionji Company in Lenaf. I was there under the pretense of contracting three bloody slimes to him to explore applications in his business, but my real plan was to diversify the bloody slime population to prevent losing them all.

I had only sat in the waiting room for about thirty seconds when Pioro threw in the door and walked in. “Ryoma! Thanks for waiting!”

Just like the time I had first visited, I hadn’t waited *at all*. It was almost like he knew I was coming.

“Perfect timing,” he exclaimed. “I’m glad to see you again so soon, but are things going fine on your end? You only just went back to the shop.”

“Oh, everything’s just peachy, thanks to the wonderful help you’ve introduced me to... Almost *too* wonderful, in fact.”

“Something up?”

“It’s a long story, but...”

The day after returning to Gimul, Ox and I held a sparring session in the empty plot by the shop, as we had planned. I was eager to put a little more effort in after my conversation with Carme, and this was Ox’s first chance to show his mettle at his new workplace. With two enthusiastic contestants, the session escalated without either of us intending. By the end of the match, the crowd of customers and employees was assaulted by the dust cloud, kids cried and the elderly fainted at the intensity of the clash. Carme told us that we might have gotten *slightly* carried away.

“Luckily, most of the customers were regulars, so they laughed it off once I offered everyone a head-to-toe wash for free. I had also notified the city guards about this exhibition, so we didn’t get into much trouble on that end...” I

explained to Pioro.

After dealing with the aftermath, Carme and I sat down to talk. He admitted that while we were carried away in the execution of the match, we did successfully showcase Ox's strength to our employees, our customers, and any potential wrongdoers. Then he reassured me that his comment the previous day was meant to show his appreciation for me being more proactive about expanding our business, and not to insinuate that I wasn't putting in my fair share. In fact, he apologized for causing any confusion on my end, which, of course, I returned with my own apology for misunderstanding his intentions.

But as we kept talking, I realized that he was happy with the more aggressive approach to expanding the business, which led me to wonder what I could do to contribute. I decided that the best way to expand was to build more branches, so I asked myself what we would require to do that. While location and staff were important, the most crucial component was money; I needed to efficiently make more capital by either increasing the profit of the laundry shop or setting up side hustles. My ideas kept expanding, and once I mentioned the ideas of collection services to the elderly and those living far away from the shop, along with setting up a private waste management company, Carme shut down the conversation.

"I know you're always taking things seriously, Boss, but stop trying to make more work for yourself at every chance you get. You work too much as it is."

"And that was that," I concluded. Carme had taken care of restructuring the shop's security schedule, revisiting emergency procedures, and filing any paperwork needed for our venture going forward.

"I asked him what I could do, and he told me to relax, since there was nothing to be done until I returned from my next outing. I pushed him several times, but he kept insisting there was nothing for me to do. So, now I'm completely without any problems or work."

"Ah, I see..." Pioro chuckled. *How does he feel about this?* "Get some rest while you can. You might need money down the road, but it's not like you're in dire straits."

"That's true. I do have a bigger clientele now that it's getting colder. Actually,

my deodorant solution is selling much more than expected.”

“Oh, that. That checks out, considering you used it at the duke’s. I bet the trend’s spread to other cities too.”

At the same time, I hadn’t heard of any subpar products going around; such was the mystery of the deodorant solution. The fact that it couldn’t be manually diluted, though I originally thought of that as a downside, was working in my favor. “Truth be told, the deodorant solution is earning me more revenue than laundry.”

“Is that so?”

“Laundry services will earn me a few small gold coins on a good day, but the deodorant usually makes double that, and occasionally it earns more than ten a day, especially in the second shop.”

“Then why are you rushing to make more money? Taking on a new service would be a huge project. That’s what that Carme kid was worried about. Telling him that right after telling him how well he’s doing his job would make anyone think that you just don’t get it.”

“I’ll admit my timing was bad... I just thought that after going out into town and starting to work, I learned a few things about what I can do. For example, do you remember when I talked about new applications for my slimes?”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

With my knowledge of slimes, I had proposed a new application of them in a different field of business. I was starting to believe that doing the same thing in other industries would be an ideal job for me. I had three concerns before starting the laundry business—Would I have enough free time to go adventuring (for sake of example)? Did I have enough experience to run a business? Would I have the social skills necessary to interact with customers and employees?

While the first concern was a matter of personal preference, I had virtually no experience in running a business, and even though I’d had some customer service experience in my previous life, I never felt adequately sociable. These concerns, however, had been alleviated by the ever-so-helpful duo of Carme

and Carla; they were living proof that the majority of a business could be left in capable hands. Even without me there, the laundry shop was running fine, and all the employees and customers were getting along without issues. Serge had told me this before, but now I understood it.

So what could I do? Putting in the effort to learn the same skills that Carme and Carla had wouldn't be a complete waste of time, but finding someone else to do something I couldn't was much faster.

After thinking about my unique skill set, I landed on the idea of proposing new ideas into businesses. Originally, I was a systems engineer. Using my experience in that field, I wondered if I could propose new businesses, or help to problem solve for existing businesses using slimes. Could I offer a different point of view, since I'd lived in another world? I could construct a system that problem-solved or smoothed out a business, giving consideration for culture, customs, and social etiquette with the help of my friends. I think that I could be of best use to this world if I could design and provide a way to run a business with slimes involved.

I explained my thought process to Pioro (minus the part about systems engineering, obviously) and it looked like he saw where I was coming from.

"If you've put that much thought into it, Ryoma, I see no reason to disagree. Just don't kill yourself working, all right?"

"Thank you, I won't. I feel like everyone's been telling me that lately... At any rate, my next step is still to expand the laundry shop. I won't lose my mind trying to save up for those, but I'll ask for a loan if I need one."

"Oh? You wouldn't even consider that before. Changed your mind, did you?"

"You could say that."

Before, even if I was in a position to ask someone for a loan, I was still unsure of how the laundry shop would prevail; I would have been borrowing money without a guarantee that I could repay it. In hindsight, I might have had too much of an aversion to the idea. But looking at my current situation, I would be able to repay the money I'd borrow, especially with the income I expected to come in from the new shop I would be building. As long as I could repay those loans within reason, the sooner I built those additional branches, the greater

my profits would become.

“I feel like I’m being a bit selfish, though. Here I turned it down before, and now I’m asking myself...”

“No sweat. We’d only just met that time; anybody borrowing money from a bloke they’ve just met without a second thought isn’t playing with a full deck. I didn’t take it personally. In fact, if you’re starting to recognize that there’s a right time to take that leap for a bigger profit, instead of keeping it safe all the time, then I’d say your business acumen has definitely improved.”

“Thank you for saying that. It certainly makes me feel like I’m improving.”

Then, something occurred to me. “You said ‘perfect timing’ when I came in. What was that about?”

“Oh, right! That totally slipped my mind. I just got my hands on the ‘goods’ we talked about. Remember? The food that’s good in everyday cooking, or to take to the Sea of Trees of Syrus.”

“*The goods*?! I thought it’d take much longer than that.”

“So did I. I guess we’re either lucky or unlucky with that... Well, there’s a catch to it. Better that I just show you first.”

While I could hardly wait to get my hands on the aforementioned goods, the first order of business was to take care of the slime-lending contract. After doing that, we handed off the three bloody slimes to an employee.

Chapter 5 Episode 36: Follow-Up #4—New Ingredient

“Over here. Check it out.”

Pioro had personally shown me to the warehouse of the Saionji company. Employees stationed there opened the heavy door for us, and we made our way through the dimly lit alleyways created by the stacks and stacks of merchandise to arrive at an enormous steel cage holding a flock of about thirty gigantic chickens. Pioro had tipped me off about these chickens and the eggs they would lay. Eggs are, of course, highly nutritious, particularly protein-wise. Considering the longer journey ahead through the Sea of Trees of Syrus, where food would be hard to come by, having some chickens to provide me with a steady supply of eggs would probably be a lifesaver. Chickens, compared to other livestock, required less space and care. The fact that they could be kept in a cage or a coop worked to my advantage too.

There was one glaring question on my mind, though. Pioro had already told me that the chickens would be large. While that was confirmed when I came face to face with the flock, I couldn't help but wonder—how could *each* of them be the same size as me?

“These are a bit different from the chickens I'd imagined,” I admitted.

“I was pretty surprised myself. Thought I was gonna end up with normal chickens.”

Thank the divine realm that these aren't normal chickens in this world.

“These guys are called ‘clever chickens.’ They're a birdlike monster, and, well, basically giant chickens. They lay eggs just like any other chicken, but both males and females lay multiple eggs a day, so they'll net you a lot more by comparison. If you keep these in your Dimension Home, you'll be able to have all-you-can-eat eggs whenever you want.”

“That sounds great, but I'll save the celebrations until after I've heard the

downsides.” Pioro was talking about these chickens like they were a burden somehow, and the employees we’d passed on our way in gave us some pretty odd looks.

Pioro obviously didn’t mean to keep any information in earnest, as he started listing the cons. “First off, they can put up a fight. You’ll see they have muscular legs and sharp claws. One of them’s a D-rank monster, and they’re considered to be C-rank in a flock. You’ll have to be able to protect yourself if you want to keep them, but that won’t be a problem for you, Ryoma. Besides, they like living in flocks, so that should work well for you. If you just sign a familiar contract and communicate with them, they might be easier to take care of than normal chickens.”

“I’m with you so far.”

“Good. Next is their feed. They mostly eat grains and bugs, but they’ll hunt other stuff if they need to. They aren’t too picky, but you gotta feed them at least triple what you’d feed a normal chicken.”

“Can I feed them plants grown with wood magic and scavenger fertilizer?”

“As long as it’s edible and not poisonous, you’re good. Wild flocks can even feed on goblins. When you’re in the sea of trees, just feed them any meat from monsters that come at you.”

That didn’t sound like too much trouble for me. I was already planning to start growing the slime feed that Elise had recommended anyway.

“But the biggest problem is,” Pioro continued, “they’ve got half a brain.”

He proceeded to explain that wild clever chickens would lay large quantities of unfertilized eggs as decoys. In the event of an attack, the flock would coordinate to fend off the attackers, protecting their nest and eggs. If they decided that they stood no chance against the attackers, they would swiftly abandon their nest and the unfertilized eggs, taking only the fertilized eggs with them. Apparently, they understood the value of their eggs in the eyes of other predators. They only seemed to become smarter as they were domesticated, and started to understand that humans were only after the unfertilized eggs; clever chickens raised in captivity would apparently even start to understand some human words. So, if they were unsatisfied with their treatment as

livestock, *i.e.* the quality of their food or comfort of their bedding, they stopped laying eggs; they understood full well that humans had little to gain from killing them.

“So they negotiate their terms...?”

“I wouldn’t call it negotiation; throwing a tantrum seems more apt. Smart as they are, they’re still chickens. I suppose they think they’ll get treated better if they refuse to lay eggs just to stick it to their owners. Sometimes it works, like if the owner hadn’t been keeping up with them, or if they’re sick or something. Worst case scenario, they’ll think that the more they gripe, the better they’ll be treated, so they’ll refuse to eat the same feed and whatnot. Kinda like some entitled shopper with nothing better to do.”

“That sounds like a hassle.”

“And these ones, well, they’re almost at that stage... They came from an ex-adventurer I’ve worked with before, who wanted me to take them off his hands before they got *out* of hand.”

“So they’re not entirely unreasonable? You said a minute ago that they got out of hand.”

“Well, about that... See that black-and-white chick in the middle of the flock?”

Amidst a little group of six chicks, there was one with black skin and white down. Was that a silkie in the otherwise entirely yellow flock?

“Looks the same, except for its color,” I noted.

“That one’s a ‘genius chicken.’ A super-rare advanced species of the clever chicken. They’re smarter than clever chickens, so when one’s born in a flock, it grows up to be their leader... That little one, though, is already the leader of this flock.”

I asked for details, and Pioro explained how when clever chickens were bred in captivity through multiple generations, there had been a few reports of a genius chicken taking the reins of the flock shortly after its birth. And when that happened the flock usually became highly entitled... I figured that was what came of a newborn making decisions for a whole group. Each of them would act like a noble, coddled and fed with a silver spoon from birth. The more I learned

about these chickens, the more human they seemed to be.

“To be fair, their ex-owner had other flocks too. If he hadn’t separated the flocks like this, they could have impacted those other flocks.”

“You mean they’d get jealous if this flock started getting special treatment...?”

The former owner of the flock had decided to get rid of the problem flock sooner rather than later, and sold them to the Saionji company for their meat in order to try and recover his losses somewhat. It seemed like a necessary and appropriate decision for someone who made his living by raising chickens, albeit monster ones.

“They can be tough to deal with, but they definitely pay off when it comes to the eggs they lay. If you think you can handle them, take them. Otherwise, I was hoping you’d help me get rid of them. Most of my butchers aren’t good fighters, and I wanted to bleed the meat with your bloody slimes, especially since they’re young enough to lay eggs.”

“So that’s why you knocked on my door.”

Since livestock required a lot of time and nourishment until they were large enough to sell for meat, it was rather inefficient to raise livestock for the sole purpose of butchering them. Chickens and cows too old to lay eggs or produce milk were often sold for meat, but outside of livestock being raised in a specific way to become delicacies for the rich, most of them were kept around for their production of eggs or milk. Naturally, if Pioro had no choice but to butcher them, he would consider it a waste not to make the most of that young meat.

“Should I try signing a familiar contract to make that decision?”

“They seemed to understand us a bit already. Try walking over and talking to it. And don’t be humble, Ryoma; be assertive, and put them in their place. Talk directly to the leader.”

“Got it.”

I walked up to the cage close enough to touch it, and all the eyes within it were already fixed on me. “We need to have a talk about what to do with you. Step forward if you are the leader of this flock,” I said assertively.

The clever chickens remained calm and quiet as the black-and-white chick slowly emerged from the group, hopping its small body one foot at a time. It was only slightly bigger than a regular chick, and its cotton-like crest gave it a very adorable appearance.

“You’re the leader?”

The chick chirped in response. I took it as confirmation.

“I want to sign a familiar contract with you, so we can communicate better.”

I waited for it to chirp again, then signed a contract.

Release us, human!

It felt dramatically different from communicating with slimes or limour birds, enough to surprise me. While I still thought that I was more compatible with the slimes, I wondered if the higher intelligence of the chicken made its thoughts seem more clear.

“Let’s start with introductions. I’m Ryoma Takebayashi. What’s your name?”

You are not worthy of knowing my name, human!

I may have gotten ahead of myself by assuming we would be on the same page. What we had here was failure to communicate.

“Listen. The way things are going, you’re going to end up on a human’s plate as food. Don’t you want to hear me out?”

If you want to talk, let us free! Or else, you enter this cage, human!

I translated the demand to Pioro. “Could you let me in?” I added.

He called over the same employee from before, who must have been in charge of the warehouse.

“Are you sure you want to let this kid inside, President...?”

“He’ll be fine. Besides, he’s the one who asked, so go ahead and unlock it already.”

“Y-Yes, sir...” Reluctantly, he unlocked the door to the cage.

Once I walked a few steps in, the adult clever chickens swiftly surrounded me,

and the leader positioned itself opposite of me.

For a human, you've got gall.

"Thanks. Now, can we talk?"

Very well! What do you want?

I stood there for a moment contemplating the juxtaposition between the chick's tiny body and its massive attitude. "Like I said, you're all going to be butchered soon. But if you promise to lay eggs for me, I can take you all in and save you from that fate. I'll provide you with food and shelter too."

Just like the other humans. Very well. For each of us, we want a full container as large or larger than us with the best wheat available. Mix in corn and other grains—the best corn and grains, naturally! Our bedding will be sunny, and have fragrant soil with delicious worms...

The chick continued to rattle off detailed and extravagant expectations with the same attitude. Many of the terms were things I couldn't fulfill during any outings to dangerous locations, even if I wanted to. It was clear to me that this was a no-deal situation.

"Unfortunately, I don't think we can work this out..."

Wait! Are you serious?!

"I couldn't possibly meet all your demands."

Imbecile! You're supposed to go highball first, then find a middle ground! That's negotiation 101!

Evidently this chicken was now my Professor of Negotiations.

"Well, then let's talk about the conditions that I *can* meet."

What can you promise us...?

As prompted, I listed some things I could provide. Firstly, when I was nearby, they could live free-range (i.e. outdoors) inside the abandoned mine, in a specific location which would be discussed later, in addition to any shelter for rain and sun as needed. Secondly, when I did need to travel, they would be given their own space in the Dimension Home. Thirdly, their feed would be

made up of average-quality products I could purchase through the Tamer's Guild or make myself; portions would be negotiated later. And finally, in exchange for all that, I would take any unfertilized eggs they produced.



I concluded by saying, “I have no intention of providing anything more than that. This is, quite frankly, the most I can provide. I could give you more ideas, but I won’t be able to follow through on any of them. Are we clear? The ball’s in your court now.”

This is blackmail! We will not cave to threats and gaslighting!

Puk-puk-puk-puk-puk-pukah!

The leader went ballistic, accompanied by the clicking of their beaks by the surrounding clever chickens.

“President, we have to get him out of there!” the employee cried. I couldn’t blame him, since he was watching a child about to get mauled by a flock of monstrous chickens.

Cluckers, rise up!

Puk-puk-puk-puk-puk-pukah!

With the leader’s every call, the flock grew louder and more forceful. Just as I had given up on continuing the negotiations, I heard the leader scream inside my head, and the clever chickens immediately fell quiet. For some reason, all of them spread their wings and bowed low to the ground in unison, almost like they were kowtowing; there wasn’t a shred of animosity left in their demeanor.

Please please please please don’t kill us please please please please please please help us please please please please please please please...

“What’s going on?! Wh-What happened?!” I didn’t seem to be in physical danger anymore, but I wasn’t following this turn of events.

“Uh, Ryoma? Don’t know if you noticed, but you had quite an ominous aura about you, and one hell of a look in your eyes to boot. Just like you did during the match the other day.”

Just like my little tussle with Ox...? I see how it is now.

Just as I’d lost all hope for the negotiations, I’d evidently slipped into a similar state as I had before. This habit of subconscious intimidation was something I really needed to work on, but right now I had more pressing issues to deal with.

“Try chilling out a little,” I simply stated.

Yes, Sir!

The leader, and the rest of the chickens, leapt to military attention.

“Now, can we continue the discu—”

Yes! Oh, yes! Of course, yes! Wow, you must be super strong, sir, we weren't expecting that, wow...

“Drop the brown-nosing! You're freaking me out!” I was having a hard time handling the complete 180 the chickens had pulled, right down to rubbing their hands (well, feathers) together like a dodgy used car salesman.

It worked when the other human did it!

Apparently, it was a habit of their ex-owner's or something. Seems like these chickens had picked up more than just a few words from humans.

“Just drop it. Can we talk normally?”

Y-Yes... But you know, sir... Our mission is civil disobedience...

“Have you forgotten what you were doing a minute or two ago?”

Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about.

“Don't give me that. You're not *that* much of a bird-brain.” *Come on, you smartass chicken*, I thought. *Look me in the eyes!* And where'd they even hear about Gandhi's motto, anyway?

“You're nothing if not good at knocking the wind out of people's sails, at least... If you don't accept those terms, though, you're going right to the butchers. We can't expect them to let you go free and take the loss.”

No, no, that wasn't an outright refusal. Just, well, you know... Uh, that is to say...

I was almost impressed by the chick's stubbornness, but then I noticed that the clever chickens were in a discussion (if one could call it that) amongst themselves.

“What are they talking about?” I asked the leader.

Um... They're talking about offering eggs instead, or turning me over...

"Oof." So the chickens were starting to cut off their newborn leader.

They're always like this... I've barely been alive for long, and they put me up to be the leader because I happened to win a battle of wits. "We can't go wrong with the smartest one as our leader," they'd say. They expect me to solve all of their problems and complain about everything to me all the time, and it's all my fault if something goes wrong... They don't understand anything I teach them. They're not as smart as humans think they are...

I didn't know why, but I felt like I was going to tear up, and I started to understand how I could comprehend his intentions so clearly. That being said, I was being honest with my conditions for herding them, so they really were going to end up on a plate if they refused... Maybe they'd be fried, grilled, or fricasseed... Or stewed with potatoes? Would they be better deep-fried with tartar sauce, or just roasted whole? Maybe even a fake Peking duck would be...

I'm sorry, so please stop listing off ways to cook us. The leader, this time alone, had reverted to its groveling state.

"Will you be my livestock now?"

I don't have much choice, and I feel like you understand my struggle a little... If you could at least make our environment decent enough that they won't start complaining right away...

"All right. I'll try my best!"

Thank you, sir...

I now had a genius chicken weathered beyond its age, and its flock of twenty-six clever chickens for familiars. Their supply of eggs would be very welcome, but I felt a bit of a void in my heart...

Chapter 6 Episode 1: The Fishing Village on the Lake

“Go straight that way and you’ll get to Lake Latoin. Bear left and you should get to Sikum. Even if you don’t get there, you should see some villages from the edge of the lake, and you can travel between the villages by boat once you’re there. It might take some time, but you’ll get there eventually.”

“Thank you for showing me this far.”

“No problem, we gotta help each other out. I doubt you’d lose your way from here, but still, be careful out there.”

“Likewise! Thanks again!”

Two weeks after I signed the familiar contract with the genius chicken and its flock, thereby securing me a sustainable supply of eggs, I was en route to Lake Latoin, an area where mad salamanders lived, to do some training.

“Right, time to go.”

After seeing off the kind merchants who had shown me here, I turned to head down the path they had pointed out. The dirt path wound into the forest.

I started down the path and found that it was as confusing a path as it could be, with tree roots crisscrossing the path every few steps. The path was mostly mud and tree roots, with a few rocks along the way; it reminded me of a mangrove preserve I had walked through when I was in Okinawa once. I kept my stride small, carefully walking toe-first. I was mostly after mad salamanders on this trip, but traversing through perilous paths like this would probably prepare me for the sea of trees.

My biggest concern was my ETA; the merchant had told me to go straight, but he had also told me we were “almost there” two hours before arriving at our lodging the previous night. I imagined that he lived out in the country, where one’s “nearest neighbor” was miles away. I guessed that it would also take me about two hours to make it through the woods.

Four hours later, I finally arrived at a beautiful lake with a village nestled along its shore. Near the entrance to the village stood a *cheval de frise* that must have been fashioned out of the mangrove-like trees, with a guard standing next to it. I approached a man in his fifties enjoying a smoke near the entrance to the village.

“Excuse me!” I called.

“Hm? You’re not from the village, are you? You alone, kid?”

“Yes. My name is Ryoma. I’m an adventurer, and I’m trying to get to the fishing village of Sikum. Am I in the right place?”

“Yeah, this is Sikum... Oh, I just remembered. Apparently, one of Kai’s chums was supposed to come by here. Would that be you?”

“If that’s the same Kai from the adventure party Sikum’s Pier, then yes, that’s me.”

“Great! Hang on a sec.” The man reached for a mallet which hung from a rope on the gate, and clanged a metal bar, which also hung from the gate, several times.

Soon, a young woman came running out from the village. “What’s going on, Manda?”

“Perfect timing, May. This is Kai’s friend.”

“Oh, the one I’ve heard so much about?! I can’t wait to—wait, you’re him? Kind of a young one... Hell, forget young, he’s just a kid,” the woman bluntly remarked.

“Nice to meet you. Ryoma Takebayashi’s the name.” Her name sounded enough like Kai’s that I wondered if they were related.

“Thank you kindly. I’m May, Kai and Kei’s older sister. Thanks for helping them out.”

“He just got here, so why don’t you show him around?” Manda offered.

“You got it,” she answered. “I’ll take him to our place for starters. I’m sure one of the boys should be home. Follow me!”

“Okay! Oh, and thanks... Manda, right?”

“No problem! Take care!”

Manda the guard watched me as I chased after May, who hastened her way back into the village. As we walked through the roads, which weren't paved but neatly flattened, I spotted children running around, women engaged in conversation around the well, elderly people who had brought out their chairs and tools working on miscellaneous things in the sun... Overall, this seemed like a very peaceful village.

“Something catch your eye?” May asked.

Did I look like I was ogling? “Oh, sorry. I had heard that there were a lot of monsters around these parts, so I didn't expect the village to seem so peaceful.”

“Mad salamanders, you mean? They usually show up around this time every year, so there's not much point in being scared of them anymore. Besides, they're after the fish we catch, so they'll come to the shore but never into the village.”

“I see... Are those buildings made out of wood and mud? They seem rather uniform.”

“Heh, that's purely out of necessity, I can assure you. We don't have anything else to build with. Trees and mud are things we can get from around here. That way, if your house breaks, it's easy to fix.”

“So everyone fixes their own homes?”

“Who doesn't? I don't know anyone around here who can afford to hire someone for a little renovation.”

This village wasn't just peaceful, but full of quite resilient people, it seemed.

“Here we are. Come on in,” she pointed out as we arrived at our destination. She held the door open for me.

“Thank you.”

I stepped into a space with the bare ground below us. It stepped up into a large, wooden-floored living room with a hearth in the center of it. It somewhat

resembled traditional Japanese architecture, which gave me an odd feeling of nostalgia.

“Kai! Kei! No answer, huh... Guess they’re not around. Well, no big deal. We have your room ready, Ryoma. Let me show you.”

Wait, what? The letter I had received earlier said that I had a room booked at an inn set up for adventurers. I asked May about this, and she explained that the aforementioned “inn” was actually the village hall. They rented rooms out to adventurers during this time of year, but as it wasn’t that large of a building, it had already filled up with other adventurers. When the village discussed the issue of what to do with the overflow of adventurers, they didn’t want to force the adventurers who had traveled all that distance to camp outside the village, so they settled on the idea of offering trustworthy adventurers a room at the house of volunteers.

“Sorry to push you around like this, but I hope you can bear with us.”

“Oh, you’re not pushing me around at all! If anything, I’m very grateful you’re putting me up for free.”

“Glad to hear it. I don’t know how things are in the cities, but around these parts, we all help each other out. Just give me a holler anytime you need anything while you’re here. I’ll try to help you any way that I can.”

The people of this village seemed closer to each other than people in the city, and they seemed so friendly, even to a stranger like me... I was a bit surprised by the sudden greeting into this culture, but it was encouraging to know I was welcome here.

“All right! Thanks for looking after me!”

The warm welcome was something I was very grateful for indeed.

And so, my training at Lake Latoin was about to begin!

Chapter 6 Episode 2: The Village Tour and a Local Specialty

“It’s been too long!”

“Thanks for coming!”

“Oh, do we have a guest?”

“Hey, mom. Didn’t realize you were with them.”

As I was organizing my things in the room they had prepared for me, Kai, Kei, and their mother had returned and came up to the room, greeted by May.

“Thank you for having me. I’m Ryoma Takebayashi.”

“Oh, so you’re the one who took care of my little idiots and their friends. You’re much younger than I imagined... Come to think of it, wasn’t next month when you were supposed to be coming?”

“Come on, mom, he’s here to help protect our catches while we get them off the boats. We won’t be doing any fishing next month.”

“What a hassle... I don’t have anything to feed our guest.”

“Wait, there’s only enough for us?”

“There’s plenty of food, but it’s not exactly...”

Maybe they had a special meal in mind for me. “Please, don’t mind me. I’ll gladly eat whatever you offer me.” I wasn’t about to complain about free food when I was already getting free room and board from them.

“Are you sure? Today we were going to—”

“Just leave dinner to us,” May cut in. “Kai, Kei. Ryoma’s going to be staying with us for a while, right? Why don’t you show him around the village? Besides, the other three know him as well, don’t they? Go let them know he’s here.”

“Hey, there’s an idea!”

“Is there anywhere you want to go first, Ryoma?”

“Now that you ask...”

I was eager to join the mad salamander hunt as soon as I could the next day, so I took them up on the offer and asked to see where the hunt would take place, so I could meet the adventurers already stationed there. Then, I asked if they could show me a place where I could train during my stay.

“That’d be a full lap around the village. Going out to shore, then to the edge of the village, and stopping by the village hall might take you until dinner.”

“Then you take him, Kei. I’ll go talk to Thane and the others. We have something to discuss anyway, and I figure we can just eat together. We’ll talk more once we get there.” The brothers, being naturally familiar with the village, solidified a tour route for me before long.

“All right, I’m off to get them. Take care.”

“Thank you,” I answered Kai. “See you later.”

“We’re going this way!” Kei called to me, and we went down the street the opposite way. The village was as peaceful as before, although the sky was darkening.

The children on the streets and the ladies at the well had seemed to retreat into their own homes, leaving fewer signs of life than before outside... That is, except for a group of young men engaged in some sort of exercise. Kei seemed to notice them too, giving them a greeting as we walked by.

I asked him about it, and Kei explained, “Fishermen always do that exercise when they get up. If a fisherman isn’t nimble, he could put himself, and his crewmates, in danger on the boat. So, before getting on a boat, they do this exercise routine together to make sure they’re at their best. That’s what I was told, anyway.”

“I see.”

“I mean, your crewmates will know if you’re not feeling well with or without that routine. To be honest, most people do it out of habit. Just don’t tell that to my pops, or any of the old folks around here who think it’s a hard-and-fast

rule.” Kei chuckled like a mischievous kid.

Then, someone called out to Kei from a distance and he answered with a greeting. Half a minute later, someone else spoke to him, then a few minutes later, there was another greeting... Kei would exchange a greeting and a few words with just about everyone we passed.

“Seems like everyone knows each other around here.”

“It’s a small village. Most of the men are fishermen, and we recognize most people here like ‘that’s so-and-so’s wife’ or ‘that’s so-and-so’s youngest.’ And if you’re not from the village, you’ll be the talk of the village. I imagine everybody around here will know your name soon enough, Ryoma.”

Small town closeness at its finest. I just need to ensure I give them a good impression.

“How many people live in this village?”

“Less than five hundred. It’s more if you include people working out in the city or who’ve married off to another village, though... We’re almost there.”

I followed his point to see something refracting through a pair of houses—the lake I had gotten a distant view of when I came to the village. Soon, we made it past the last building before the shore.

I could hardly believe how beautiful it was; nothing impeded my view. The wind made ripples along the vast lake, refracting flickers of light. The water was crystal clear, and didn’t look too deep; I could see the vibrant vegetation on the lake’s floor from where I stood. Although the breeze was cold, I felt a sense of warmth at the view.

A white beach stretched between us and the lake, and I finally saw a semblance of a fishing port in the rows of small fishing boats and tools.

“How do you like the view?” Kei asked.

Making my way through the woods, the scenery of Okinawa had come to mind for me...

“It’s beautiful. Really. It’s like nature has been preserved as much as possible. Plus it’s idyllic enough that I bet tourists would love it here.”

“Glad to hear it.”

According to Kei, Lake Latoín was practically sacred to all of the fishing villages around it. The lake provided them with food and livelihood; they took pride in their duty of conserving the lake.

“There must be some rules to ensure conservation, then.”

“Well, since you’re not a fisherman, the rules aren’t as strict for you, but there are a few things we’d like you to be careful of. For example, anyone can receive the blessing of the lake, but only by pole-fishing or catching by hand, unless you’re a fisherman; you can’t use nets or baskets. And, do you see that little island on the surface?”

“Uh... The one that looks like a raft made out of branches? Yeah, I can see something small on top of it.” It was hard to identify the creature in the distance through the refracting light, but I could see a furry animal that resembled a beaver or otter.

“That’s a winter nest, built by a monster we call an isle rat. They also serve as refuge for small fish and markers for fishermen to find their fishing spots in spring. So we can’t harm isle rats or their nests. Be careful not to chase any away if you see them on the beach or in the village; they’re quite harmless.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

He continued to list some more basic etiquette like not littering, using the designated bathrooms, and so on, as we walked along the beach.

The village of Sikum was located to the southeast of Latoín Lake, which meant the beach—which would be my office as of tomorrow—was to the northwest of the village. Kei’s house was evidently close to the west side of the village. We walked along the shore of the lake northward, and I came out with a good layout of the place: the pier, the building used to keep and treat the fish, and other locations I would be coming to during my work.

“Right, now you should be able to find your way around during work without getting lost.”

“Yeah, I should be fine.”

“Great. Now I’ll show you your training ground.”

We continued our small talk as we went around the edge of the village about a quarter of the way. We came to a location due east of the village, bordering the mangrove forest where a good number of trees had been trimmed or cut down to a stump.

“This is where we harvest our lumber and firewood, so you’ll have quite a bit of space, and you won’t bother anyone if things get a bit loud. What do you think?”

“It’s a very wide clearing, considering how close to the village we are. Looks like I could bring out my familiars.”

“That reminds me, you’re collecting slimes, aren’t you? Sometimes we find a slime called a mud slime here—”

“Really? Sweet!” A *mud* slime... That made sense, considering the local terrain. “How often do you see them?”

“Huh? Uh... I’ve seen them a few times myself when I come to get firewood. I’m sure you’d find one if you looked for it.”

That settles it. I’ll try and find one while I’m out jogging or something... Whatever the cost.

“Looks like you’re already eyeing for one... I’m glad you like the spot, anyway. The sun’s coming down, so why don’t we head to the village hall?”

The thought of a new slime lurking around the corner was nagging at me hard, but I forced the thought down and headed back with Kei. We went from the village hall to a few houses, introducing myself and handing a few gifts to my soon-to-be colleagues. Maybe it was the unfamiliar locale, but I was acting like an office’s new hire. Good thing those adventurers took it well.



After all of that, we finally made it home... Well, at least it *would* be my home for the time being. When we returned to Kei’s house, I could hear a crowd behind the closed door. As it turned out, the adults had already started to drink.

“Why is dad already drinking?” Kei asked May.

“What was I supposed to do? He asked for a drink first thing, and you know how quiet and stoic he usually is. A drink or two’ll help him make a better first impression.”

“May! Kei! Why are you keeping our guest standing around?! Give him a seat!”

We’d barely gotten through the introductions before more drinks were brought, and we all took our seats around the hearth. Across from me stood Kei’s father, a man named Hoy. He looked to be in his fifties with his wrinkles and long beard, but he was built like a bodybuilder with rippling muscles and a dark tan, perhaps from decades of labor; it made him look much younger from the neck down. He reminded me of my past life a little, which gave me a sense of camaraderie.

“You really are a shrimp.”

“Dad!”

“Hey, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. I am quite young, after all.”

“Still, I’ve heard all about how you helped these knuckleheads out... They’re good kids, but they don’t know anything that goes on outside of this little village. The farthest we go around here’s the city across the lake. It was all fine and dandy how they set off like they were going on vacation, but...” He went on to recount the failed adventure.

While the father seemed positively giddy in his drunkenness, the members of Sikum’s Pier, who had once come to sell a bloody slime to the Tamer’s Guild in Gimul, all looked rather uncomfortable at the reminder.

“Fancy seeing you all again, Shin, Thane, Peyron.”

“Yeah...”

“Uh huh...”

“Mm...”

“Dinner’s ready! Make room!” Their mother came in, thankfully clearing the air.

The group parted to make way for her to carry a large pot, enough bowls for everyone, and a sphere that looked like a woven plant from the dirt floor kitchen to the hearth. The sphere looked like it was boiled, with something inside of it. It had a scent that wasn't powerful, and yet somehow nostalgic. Whatever it was, it was some sort of seafood. My excitement climbed as I remembered that there were plenty of fish here that I couldn't have tasted in Gimul.

"Ugh. *This* is what we're having?"

"You don't like this dish, Kai?"

"I do, but most outsiders don't."

He went through the trouble of lifting the pot lid to show me, so I obliged.

"Crab?!" The pot was filled to its brim with fist-sized crabs boiled bright red! "Wow... This brings me back!" They must have been a freshwater crab, right from the lake. In Japan, I had eaten crab a few times as an occasional treat, but I had never even seen one in this world before. "You can catch crabs from the lake too?"

"By the traploads. You don't mind them, Ryoma?"

"It's a common food in my homeland, and one of my favorites to boot."

"Oh, really?" Their mother looked relieved. "That's great if you can eat them. I made some fish too, but there's plenty of these. Have as much as you want." She lined the hearth with skewered fish, and poured soup into our bowls, with a much brighter expression on her face. She handed us the bowls filled to the brim with the chunky soup.

"Go ahead, dig in!"

I took one of the crabs, tore off a leg and took a bite... It was lean, and plumper than I had expected. The sweet crab juices soaked through my mouth with every bite, complemented by just the right amount of salt... Simple, yet perfect execution.

"Yes, it's delicious!" I exclaimed. Smaller crabs made for smaller legs, which were easy for me to eat even in my child's stature.

“Look at you go! Have as much as you want. Here’s another crab, and your soup.”

“Thank you, May... Mm! This soup is wonderful.” The soup had a kick to it; it tasted somewhat like mustard and red pepper, but it mixed perfectly with the fish broth.

“Here comes another one, kid.”

“Thank you.” *I could eat a hundred of these crabs!*

“Here! Don’t be shy, now!”

What a feast... Everyone kept offering me more and more food, and I kept eating and eating.

Once everyone was full, Shin, Thane, and Peyron went home, bringing an end to my welcome dinner. Then, May led me to my room, convincing me with little effort that I was quite tired from the journey and would have an early morning for work tomorrow.

While I was laying alone in bed, I realized that we were too busy eating crab to have any real conversation.

Chapter 6 Episode 3: Breakfast at the Fishing Village and the Forgotten Gift

The next morning, I was woken up in the distinctly pre-dawn darkness by some sort of sound. I forced myself to go through the bare minimum morning routine in the biting cold. We were very close to the lake, after all.

I soon discovered that the sound which had woken me up was coming from the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I called.

“Oh! Good morning.”

“Did we wake you?”

May and her mother were cooking in the kitchen under the light of a small candle and the stove flame itself. “I slept soundly, since I went to bed so early. Can I help with breakfast?”

“Oh, my. I wish my little knuckleheads would take a page out of your book.”

“Since you’re offering... Do you know where the well is?” May asked. “If you do, can you fill this urn with water?”

The urn was as tall as I was, and very wide. I did know where the well was, but instead of that...

“*Water.*”

“Wait... You can use magic, Ryoma?”

“Yes. I realized we barely spoke yesterday over dinner, so I forgot to mention it... How’s that?”

“That’s plenty of water. Now, can you grind this up, using these?” She handed me a mortar and pestle, along with...

“Wasabi?” The ingredient looked exactly like wasabi, except it was yellow.

“Wasabi? Is that what you call horice in your homeland? You called water spiders ‘crabs’ yesterday too.”

The name “horice” triggered my pool of herbal knowledge. It grew in shallow and clear rivers or dirt, and had a unique spiciness to it. It had potent antibacterial properties, and could also be used to clear one’s digestive system. It wasn’t exactly the same, but close enough.

“I think they’re very similar plants. How much do you need?”

“The whole thing, pretty much. We’re going to add it to the soup.”

“Got it!”

I began the task, now that I knew the source of the spice in last night’s soup. I plucked the leaves, then quickly rinsed and minced the root before throwing it in the mortar. After crushing the whole thing, I started getting in there and grinding it with the pestle. I kept grinding up the considerable quantity of the spice, enjoying the powerful, rejuvenating scent...

“Do you ever use this spice on raw fish?” I asked.

“I know a few people who do, but raw fish can have little nasties in them that do a number on your stomach. Not the best idea, especially at this time of the year.”

I couldn’t say I wasn’t disappointed, but I knew better than to go against the advice of a local. She implied that we wouldn’t need to worry about parasites in cooked or processed fish, so I would gladly have my fill of those while I was here...

Suddenly, I remembered—I hadn’t yet given them the gift I intended to share the day before.

“A gift? For us?” their mother asked.

“Yes. Excuse me for a moment.”

I returned to my room and used Dimension Home. Navigating the space, which was now larger than a school gym, I stepped towards the living space of the recently familiarized clever chickens. One of them noticed me and cawed loudly, prompting the black chick to emerge from the huddled flock.

Good morning, Boss! Up bright and early today?

“Morning, Kohaku. I know it’s earlier than usual, but can you get me today’s supply?”

No problem. Already took care of it.

This one was the lone advanced species and leader of the flock. Kohaku the genius chicken bootlickingly rubbed its wings together as he hopped over to the row of baskets, each lined with cloth and two of them piled high with eggs.

“Okay. This’ll do for today... Once I check them over, I’ll get you your food.”

Yes, sir! We’ll be waiting by the food box. By now, Kohaku didn’t have a shred of the pompous behavior he had originally exhibited at our first meeting.

I carefully lifted the egg-filled basket and carried it to the slimes’ living space. Instructing the cleaner slime, now bigger from merging, to wash the day’s batch of eggs, I checked them over for any cracks. I noted how clever chickens weren’t too attached to their eggs; this was illustrated by how they piled the eggs two baskets high instead of evenly distributing them. Well, they only acted like that when it came to the unfertilized eggs meant for use as decoys, obviously. Watching the big cleaner slime carefully take egg after egg into its outstretched, tentacle-like appendages and squeezing it out the other end into a different basket, I couldn’t help but let out a satisfied exhale.

The clever chickens and I had formed a working relationship by now, but the same could not be said of when I first took them in... There were no complaints about the feed, since I had prepared the same food their former owner had prepared, the recipe of which was relayed to me through the Saionji company employee who was tasked with feeding the chickens while they were held in the warehouse. The problem seemed to be with their living space; when we were discussing their free-range location in the abandoned mine, they kept demanding conditions with complete disregard to how reasonable they were. Maybe it was my fault for signing a familiar contract with all of them to streamline our communication.

In the end, we settled on having them live in the Dimension Home for a while, because it was “cold outside.” Since I was preparing their food anyway, they apparently preferred lounging around in the warm indoors over hunting for

worms and other bugs on their own. There were a few calls for me to travel somewhere warm and let them roam, and for me to travel through the year like a migratory bird for their comfort. Those suggestions were taken into consideration, and promptly denied. Even in the Dimension Home, they had complained about the disparity in living spaces between them and their predecessors—the limour birds and slimes.

But now, the clever chickens seemed to have formed a hierarchy of sorts; I was at the top, followed by the limour birds, then the slimes, then Kohaku (their leader), and finally themselves. In fact, I had made a great effort to ensure that they would commit their social standing to memory. I lost count of how many times I had to push them back in their corner with a wave of slimes in an effort to make the chickens see them as superior. They had never messed with the limour birds that much; maybe they put a lot of stock in the ability to fly. However, they had initially seen the slimes as not particularly tasty prey. Getting them to change that view was not an easy process. They finally shut up after I held a one-on-one test of strength with champions from each group, and the clever chicken champion got owned by a sticky slime wielding a stick... If that hadn't done the trick, it would've been "to the cage or the butcher's block" for them, to coin a phrase.



The aforementioned champion was beaten thoroughly enough to demand a respite from laying eggs, so I patched it up thoroughly with healing magic before denying the request for time off.

Truth be told, I had grown a sense of respect for Kohaku, who had kept that flock in check as a months-old chick, and I still relied on him to keep them in line. Regrettably, the clever chickens and I seemed to be less compatible personality-wise when it came to our familiar contracts, so our communication was a bit fuzzy at times.

I had spoken to a branch manager of the Tamer's Guild about this matter, and he informed me that it was hardly rare for communication with one's familiars to be difficult, and that my experience of talking to and giving commands to my familiars effortlessly was highly uncommon. He added that many tamers would employ the carrot-and-stick tactic, training their familiars like animals. They were living creatures, after all, so I guess it made sense that there would be some difficulty when it came to working with them.

I probably didn't have much difficulty because my only familiars were intelligent limour birds, which were compatible with me, and slimes, which were considered one of the easiest creatures to tame. Working with the clever chicken had the potential to be a valuable experience for me, especially with Kohaku as our mediator and the huge upside of getting baskets full of fresh eggs five times a week. Speaking of eggs, some of the poison and acid slimes showed interest in them...

The big cleaner slime touched my leg, letting me know that all of the eggs had been washed while I was lost in my own thoughts.

"Good work," I said.

I counted fifty-two eggs left intact, and eight cracked ones. Then, I appraised a few of the eggs, and found they were fit for consumption. I gave the cracked eggs to some slimes that showed interest in them, and gathered up the rest.

Finally, I went to pour feed into the clever chickens' food box.

How were they? Kohaku asked.

"Out of sixty in total, eight were cracked."

Drats... I'll have to tell them not to pile them up so high.

"Still a lot better than when we were starting out, at least."

My contract with the clever chickens stated that they would give me sixty eggs a day, five days a week. Twenty out of the flock of twenty-six were old enough to lay eggs, so that came out to three eggs per chicken.

"I can let a few cracked eggs slide, but I can't be lenient about the chicks' hygiene."

No problems there, boss. There's been no complaints about having scavengers clean our nests and cleaners bathing us every day. I wouldn't take that from anyone anyway. Plus, I haven't forgotten about raising our young.

The hygiene routine was there to keep the Dimension Home clean and disease-free; the limour birds underwent the same process every day. When it came to raising their young, well, they were the next generation. I couldn't do anything about how mature the clever chickens were, but Kohaku and the other five chicks had a future ahead of them. They could be entitled at times, but not nearly as much as the mature chickens. For better or worse, they were a blank state. I wanted to believe that they were redeemable as long as they received proper education.

"Keep it up, please. I'll help out as much as I can."

I'm putting my heart and soul into it. I need more allies around here, Kohaku assured me, resolution kindling in his eyes.

With my basket of fresh eggs, I left the Dimension Home to return to the kitchen.



Breakfast was ready. On the menu this morning was the same horice soup as last night. This soup was a versatile staple like miso soup was in Japan, so the soup today included leftover crab meat from last night and my eggs. In addition, we had some sort of thinly baked bread made from—much to my surprise—the familiar grainspear grass I used to frequently eat back in the forest. On the side, we had a dish that resembled pickled radish.

Since people started their mornings early in fishing villages, they usually had a bowl of soup they could quickly consume paired with something filling.

“Oh? What’s this feast we’re having?”

“Where did you get bird eggs from?”

“Ryoma brought them out for us. Apparently he’s keeping chickens using space magic.”

“He even helped us cook this morning while you dimwits were sawing logs.”

Kai and Kei paid no mind to their sister’s comment, but seemed entranced by the soup. I was glad my contribution was so appreciated.

“Thanks...” their father muttered. It didn’t register to me what he had said until we made eye contact.

“Oh, you’re very welcome,” I answered.

He simply took his bowl and started on his breakfast. Did he have low blood pressure or something? I could hardly believe this was the same man I saw last night.

“Don’t mind him,” his wife explained. “You’d think my husband was almost mute if he didn’t drink... ‘Food,’ ‘booze,’ and ‘bed’ make up the gist of his vocabulary when he’s sober.”

“I see.” I thought I heard that mentioned last night, but I didn’t think it was this extreme.

“He’s not mad or anything. Now eat up, Ryoma,” she concluded and plated me a mountain of grainspear grass bread.

Seeing that their father had started eating, his children started eating their own food. I followed suit...

Delicious. The grainspear grass bread had a unique aftertaste, but it didn’t bother me after I soaked it in the spiced soup. In fact, it gave the bread a good kick to it. There was something about the soup, though... A sense of nostalgia, like I was on the brink of remembering something.

“What’s the matter? Is the soup not to your liking?” Kei’s mother asked,

concerned.

“Oh, no, it’s excellent. I was just thinking... I feel like I’ve tasted something like this before, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”

Time for breakfast seemed to be running out, so I decided to clear my plate before dwelling on the thought any further; I had some catching up to do as everyone in the family ate pretty fast. I was going to start dealing with mad salamanders, after all, and I didn’t want to do that on an empty stomach!

Chapter 6 Episode 4: Mad Salamander Hunt

We left the house after breakfast. The sky was still dark and the air a bit foggy, which made for poor visibility. At least it wasn't completely dark, and I was shown the way yesterday. Moreover, I definitely wouldn't be lost with Kai and Kei with me. Their father had finished breakfast first and gone without us. We made our way through our commute, constantly moving our fingers and raising our knees high to keep warm.

As we neared the lake, more and more people emerged onto the street for their commute and exchanged greetings with each other.

"Whoa..." I muttered in amazement as we reached the shore where hundreds of well-built men were separated into two groups, watching over the lake in anticipation. Near each group blazed a bonfire in lieu of torches, and numerous dots of light floated above the lake, indicating a fleet of boats. There were eight additional bonfires and adjoining piles of firewood on the beach; men with harpoons I initially mistook for spears stood near them. The rising flames reflected on the dark water of the lake, creating a mystic atmosphere as the fog blurred the outline of the light sources. Flutes and drums seemed to be the chosen method of communication between boats, which gave me the impression of a Japanese summer festival.

"This way, Ryoma. Let's go."

"Yes, sir!"

I had no time to be awestruck by the view. I first reported to the manager of our adventurer group, and joined the members of Sikum's Pier. It was customary for mad salamander hunting to be done in teams, so I was going to join the Pier.

"Good morning!" I called.

"Morning."

"Hey. Looks like you didn't have any trouble getting up."

Shin, Thane, and Peyron each answered me; the whole team was now assembled, but we still seemed to have some time before the hunt commenced.

“If you don’t mind, how exactly does one hunt mad salamanders?” Even though I had researched the basics and had been told *how* to hunt them from the other adventurers I had met last night, it wouldn’t hurt to ask for any tips or pointers from those who had experience.

“Uh... You’ll get the idea when you see them, but they’re big and black. And there’s lots of them,” Kai said.

Uh oh. All I could think of were accursed cockroaches.

“They’re after the fish on the boats and in the collection site here, so protecting the fish is more important than actually taking down the salamanders. There are lots of them in our village, so we take turns dealing with them. We do have veteran adventurers who take the quest every year, so you should be able to follow their lead at first. Even though we’ll be taking shifts, you will be dealing with monsters, and the whole thing will last until lunch. Get some rest while you can, or you’ll crash too early,” Kei added.

All right. Stamina and pacing was going to be important.

“Aside from that... A monster called the pocket eagle might come down from the sky, so watch out for them too.”

“Yeah... Those guys will sometimes steal fish while we’re fighting the salamanders. They might be worse than the mad salamanders.”

This was news to me. According to Shin and Thane, the pocket eagle was a kind of monster that reaped what another sowed. Furthermore, they dive-bombed from very high altitudes, making them difficult to see and anticipate.

If they’re going to attack from the sky, perhaps I should send the limour birds on patrol. The pocket eagle was clever but not too strong, and apparently preferred attacking alone. Taking them on with a team of limour birds seemed safe enough... Though I figured I’d keep an eye on how things went today first before making the suggestion.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder. “Peyron? What is it?”

“Look over there,” he said, pointing to a handful of men who were butt-naked in the frigid air. I had been told that we would take turns hunting the salamanders, starting with the team closest to the bonfires by the lake, so they must have been the first team. I looked out at the lake to find the boats forming a half-circle, indicating the fast-approaching hunt... Were they really going to hunt monsters naked?

“Mad salamanders have two methods of attack—tackling and biting. Depending on how big they are, they wouldn’t give you anything worse than a broken bone. But they will try to drag you into the water... Drowning is the real danger of this hunt.”

In other words, some people prioritized mobility underwater over protection on land by removing their clothing.

“Not that you need to be *naked*. Those are just the young ones trying to show off.”

“Just taking off your pants would do. The water wouldn’t be much deeper than your waist anyway.”

I decided to change into my long water boots and jumpsuit.

“And don’t forget to warm up by the fire. Wouldn’t want you to catch your death.”

I continued to ask questions and prepare myself for the hunt. Five minutes later, a few boats docked on the shore. Fishermen ran out of them, heaving and hoeing a pair of ropes that were laid out, sloping into the water. *A seine, perhaps?* The men began slowly pulling the net out of the lake, causing ripples throughout the water. Just as I began to see the top of the net emerge from the water, the light above one of the boats rose higher, and began to draw a circle.

“Here they come, boys!” a seasoned-looking elderly man shouted, echoed by cheers from the men on the beach.

Multiple shadows were cast onto the rippling water by the light, moving towards the same boat.

“Go!”

“Don’t let them through!”

The fishermen aboard the boats picked up their sticks and harpoons, beginning their attack on the ripples. The boat that sent the light signal led the attack, which spread through the semi-circle fleet.

A few mad salamanders were already being dragged onto boats, with more and more being caught every second. Meanwhile, some of the fishermen on the beach pulled the net in tighter to collect the fish, while the others poised their harpoons.

“I know we’re supposed to take turns, but there’s nothing for the adventurers to do... Those fishermen know what they’re doing!”

“Damn straight, kid! We don’t know much about monsters on land, but we deal with monsters in the water every day!”

“We may be fighting them for fish, or fighting them *to* fish them.”

“You adventurers might have an edge on land, but no one’s better than us when it comes to fighting near water!”

Some of the fishermen sharing a bonfire with me called back upon hearing my comment. Then it hit me... *Fishermen in this world fight monsters too.*

Then, the naked fishermen sprinted into the lake; a mad salamander must have gotten past the fleet. The ripple on the water that indicated the salamander’s location headed straight to the net, but the fishermen saw it coming and went to block its way. With a shout, one of them struck the ripple with his harpoon.

“Whoa!”

“Got a big one today!”

“I can’t get it alone, give me a hand!”

The wounded salamander thrashed, causing splashes in the water and revealing its body. It was a giant, newt-like creature no less than fifteen feet long; it also resembled a lizard or a tadpole with webbed feet. Three naked fishermen all struck at it with their harpoons, dragging it out to shore with brute force. The enormous carcass hit the beach, and cheers erupted.

“Mad salamanders don’t die on land, but they’re much slower, and we don’t have to worry about drowning. Once you get it out of the water, then you can take your time putting it out of its misery.”

As Kei explained the process, I visualized doing it myself.

Soon, it was our turn.

“All right, Ryoma, give it a shot! We’ll cover you.”

“Yes, sir...! Here I go!”

At this moment, I was standing towards the right end of the seine. A mad salamander slipped through the right hand side of the fleet. I hoisted my own harpoon I’d borrowed like a javelin, energy rushing through me, and charged at the salamander.

The water was freezing, but my jumpsuit kept me dry. Ignoring the icy sensation, I waited in a spot where the water was knee-high. Waiting for the right moment, I shoved my harpoon deep into the mad salamander’s body. Naturally, the monster, about ten feet long, went berserk. I used all of my weight to lean into the harpoon.

I was a child (at least in body) standing in a pool of water; one wrong move could send me flying. I could hardly move my feet for fear of slipping on the sandy bottom. I bent my knees, my feet firmly planted into the ground, then focused on keeping my weight centered...and with a howl, I hoisted the salamander right onto the beach.

“Yeah! Great job!”

“Keep it pinned down!”

Thane and Kei rushed over. The mad salamander I had caught was beaten to death with the handles of their harpoons. At the same time, Kai ran past us, charging at another mad salamander.

No time to celebrate my first kill.

I quickly carried the mad salamander’s carcass to a designated spot, and rushed back into position. As Kai dragged another one out of the water, Thane went into the lake. Splitting our group of six into two teams of three, we took

turns capturing the salamanders and taking care of the carcasses. We did have breaks in between, but this whole routine of running to the lake, catching a thrashing deadweight, and carrying it back to shore was all well and good the first few dozen times, but we would be repeating this process until lunch...

Well, I can't say it doesn't make for some good training!

Chapter 6 Episode 5: Lunch in the Village

The mad salamander hunt had been repetitive and arduous work, which I had expected, but one couldn't call it menial work either.

Once the fishermen had pulled the first seine, they transferred their catches into baskets. Meanwhile, we had to ensure no salamanders made it onto shore. The basketed fish were intended to be taken to the processing station or on boats to other towns, so we had to be ready to jump into any station as required.

Once the boats sailed and the village's catch was carried to the processing station, the salamanders focused their attention on the one location, so we tackled the charging horde head-on. Throughout the hunt, we had to be aware of fishermen and their work, and always be ready to improvise.

How many mad salamanders are there, anyway...? They would come in varying waves, but their assault was constant until high noon; by then, the picturesque beach had been littered with salamander carcasses. I was astonished that this would go on for *days*.

"All right, looks like that's the last of them for today," the leading adventurer announced. "Round up the bodies on the beach! We're done here!"

The hunting parties replied with a roar of excitement, eager to finally end the monotonous hunt. Gaining a second wind at seeing one last task to do for the hunt, we hauled all the carcasses off the beach, concluding our work for the day.

"Great job."

"Good work, Kai, everyone."

"A job well done."

"One day down."

"You seem...surprisingly fine, Ryoma. People who aren't used to the job

usually tap out halfway through or burn themselves out by the end.”

“Kid’s got a lot of stamina for his age...”

“It’s the one thing I’ve got going for me.”

Sikum’s group started to congregate, so I asked what their plans were for the rest of the day.

“For starters, we were gonna take a nap or get a bite for lunch,” Thane answered.

“We did have an early morning, I suppose.” Seemed like a great time for lunch to me.

“Let’s start there. We usually like to discuss things over food anyway,” Shin proposed, to the group’s agreement.

I thought we would be having lunch at one of the members’ houses, but our first stop was the processing station for the fish that were just caught.

“Sis! Six bowls of rice, please.”

“Coming right up. Take a seat!” a cheerful voice answered as we came through the door.

“May?”

“She’s— Well, most of the women in the village work here.”

“They work in the afternoon too. It’s much easier to eat together here, and everyone cooks lunch in their own place. Most fishermen and their families eat lunch here.”

“I see.”

Indeed, as I followed the Pier into a grand dining hall, there were already crowds of men starting on their lunches. Before long, May and two kids about my age came over with a serving tray.

“Here you go!” she said. “Scrumptious veggie soup today!”

“Vegetables, huh? Don’t see that every day.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks...”

Then I noticed that the boys who had brought us lunch gave me a look as they turned away.

“Something wrong?”

“No, nothing,” I answered. They must have noticed that I was an outsider in this village. Still, my curiosity was dwarfed by my desire to eat my lunch before it got cold. The vegetable soup was served with a piece of bread. Once again, the soup had large chunks of vegetables in them.

Yep, this is delicious.

I could taste hints of daikon radish, burdock and lotus root, as well as that same spice from before; it was another dish that somehow felt nostalgic to me.

“Phew... That really warms you up.”

People greeted me as they passed by our table.

“Saw you at the hunt, kid. Great work.”

“Oh, thank you,” I answered.

“Ah, so you’re the little one running around. Eat up.”

“I will, thank you.”

Maybe it helped that I had done a morning’s work with them, but the people of this village seemed friendlier and closer, even to an outsider like myself. Among their fellow villagers, they were more than just close-knit; they were practically family. Their hospitality, partnered with the great food, gave me a great feeling of warmth.

I imagined living in this village came with just as many problems as living in a big city, but it wouldn’t be too bad to spend my retirement somewhere like this...

“Is there anything you want to do today, Ryoma?”

“Let’s see... Some preparations for tomorrow’s hunt, I suppose.” Having experienced my first mad salamander hunt, I wanted to get my familiars involved in a way where they wouldn’t interfere with the others.

“My first thought was how there were a lot more of them than I had anticipated. I feel like we dealt with our section well enough, but they did get through the defenses at one point.”

“I remember that.”

“It happened to that other team today, but our team could face a wave in areas where there are simply too many of them. I wanted to prepare accordingly, so we could deal with more of them at once if needed.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Me too.”

“No objections from me.”

“Likewise.”

“Great. We’ll help Ryoma do that this afternoon, then.”

That was settled rather easily... But I couldn’t help remembering how, at my old office job, many of my suggestions to improve workflow had been brushed off with the response that “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Even if it actually *was* broken.

How would the team take my suggestions for change...?

Great. We’ve wasted all this time doing an inefficient job.

You’re calling us stupid for not coming up with this sooner?

Who do you think you are?

Those would be the most extreme reactions, but I knew how resistant to change people could be... I had expected at least some of that from the team, but when I expressed that to them, they shared a chuckle.

“This is how fishermen deal with the salamanders; people like us who grew up here learn how to do it that way, but I’m sure adventurers would come up with something different. Still, it’s all good as long as it gets the job done. Besides, I’m sure we could learn things from outside ideas. My adventuring mentor once told me that doing the basics, like preparing for the job and learning when you can over and over again, is the most important part of the job... Though I never

really put that into practice until I came back from our adventure.”

Back then, their entire trip had almost been wasted because they weren’t as thorough as they could have been with their research. I ended up with a bloody slime in the end, but apparently the Pier had learned some things too. In any case, I was glad that they were so receptive to suggestions.

“I’ve got another question. I didn’t see anyone casting magic this morning. Is that forbidden?”

“No, it’s allowed. We just don’t have anyone in this village who can use it. Most adventurers who can go defend bigger towns around the lake,” Thane said.

“Not to mention the number of those salamanders... I doubt their magical energy would last all morning. There’s decent money in the quest, but using magic healing potions would hurt their bottom line, or maybe even put them in the red,” Kei added.

“Fire doesn’t do much. Lightning tends to strike *someone* in the crowd. Big, flashy spells can take out a bunch of them at once, but they can also scare the fish away. As for poison spells, those are out of the question... That’s the kind of stuff I overheard when I was a kid, anyway. Magic takes a lot of caution, I guess,” said Peyron.

While I would need to exercise caution, I was technically cleared to use magic. I continued asking a few more questions as we ate lunch, contemplating how to use my slimes in action.

Chapter 6 Episode 6: Ryoma's Sales Pitch

By afternoon, the beach, which had once been emptied after the morning's hunt, was once again crowded, with many children and elderly people to be seen among the fishermen and adventurers. The presence of this crowd was undoubtedly due to the horde of a thousand poison and sticky slimes surrounding me, as well as the exhausted members of Sikum's Pier beside them.

"What do you think? My slimes aren't half bad, are they?"

"Y-You could say that," Shin said.

"Are you sure these are slimes?!" said Kai.

Thane grunted. "I've never seen slimes move like that..."

"Me neither," Peyron agreed.

Kai spoke up as well. "Aren't slimes supposed to be slow and soft and weak...and *not* use weapons?"

Despite their befuddlement, I could assure them that my familiars were most certainly slimes. "I just taught them a few things."

"You must be one hell of a teacher..."

"They're much stronger than I expected. Never thought I'd see slimes hold spears and make coordinated movements."

"There are just so many of them."

"You can only fend off so many at a time, so when they keep coming at you like that... They make sure to dodge attacks to their core, somehow."

"How do you plan on using them, Ryoma?"

That's the question I've been waiting for, Kai!

"They can move faster than wild ones, but their mobility is not their strong suit, so I would like for them to protect the processing station. As you've just

seen, the poison slimes can form a multi-layer spear barricade to defend against charging mad salamanders; this should take out a good number of them. I can also have them leave a few gaps in the barricade to narrow down the salamanders' attack route, allowing the sticky slimes to ambush them. Their sticks are heavy enough to generate decent force. With a dogpile of five or ten slimes to one salamander, they should be able to beat them down. Even if the sticky slimes can't finish the job, they should weaken the salamander enough to make our job easier!"

"Right..."

"I've never seen Ryoma this excited."

"Except for maybe the first time we met him."

"Ambush and dogpile, huh? They could do the job."

"Even if they can't kill the salamanders, they just have to thin out the horde or slow their attack down."

Both Thane and Shin had covered what I wanted to say. In order to accomplish that, the slimes would need to successfully lure the salamanders through the gaps in the barricade, as well as maintain the barricade itself. In order to make sure that happened, I had one more trick up my sleeve.

"Dimension Home."

I summoned the familiar flock of six limour birds onto the beach, as well as the magical slimes—earth, wind, dark, light, and healer. They had mostly supported my day-to-day stuff outside of combat, so they had never really had a place to shine until now. Still, they had been practicing their magic everyday.

"The healer slimes will recover the other slimes, and the light slimes will provide support. The rest will provide back-up with their respective spells."

"I heard spell-casting monsters are high-rank or hard to find... But you've got so many of them."

"And they're pretty much all slimes."

"I can't help but be impressed, on multiple levels."

I could sense the team's impression of me changing before my eyes...but

there was still more to say!

“These dark slimes finally learned the intermediate spell, Dark Mist!”

Unlike other elements, the dark attack magic cast by dark slimes would not physically damage the enemy, but drain their life force instead. Dark Mist was a spell that spread life-sucking darkness like a cloud of mist, attacking multiple enemies at once... Or at least, that’s what I had read in a book on dark magic I had come across at the duke’s. Seeing the words “Edited by the Magic Guild” was enough to earn my trust until I could observe the spell in action.

“To be honest, the dark slimes only learned the spell recently, so I haven’t been able to find a suitable enemy to practice it on.”

“But it won’t hurt us, right?”

“I’ll see that it won’t. There shouldn’t be any collateral damage if I keep them on the very front lines. Plus it only affects an area of about five or six people lined up shoulder-to-shoulder, so I might actually need to try and contain the mad salamanders within that range...”

With the weapon-wielding poison and sticky slimes aided by magic, I doubted that my little experiment would negatively affect the hunt at large. It would have been perfect if the metal and iron slimes, who could move with much agility, could join the flank. But unfortunately, the weight of those slimes became more of a hindrance than I’d thought when they were on sand.

They moved by slightly transforming the rear of their bodies, almost jumping into a roll. I knew that the beach wouldn’t be the ideal location for such a maneuver, but after trying it in action, they could barely move in a straight line. That apparently struck a nerve for them, which had led to them starting a jog (if I could even call it that) on the sand. Although they had kept at it while I introduced the poison, sticky, and magic-wielding slimes to the team, the metallic slimes had barely improved... They couldn’t fight in this condition. When I tried to tell them that, perhaps because they had always taken part in combat as my “weapons,” I sensed some discontent from them.

Isn’t there some way I can include them...? Maybe they could transform and serve as part of the barricade...?

“Hello?”

“Great, lost in his own thoughts.”

“He’s a good kid, but definitely a bit weird.”

“Hey, you guys see that crowd...?”

“Let’s just leave Ryoma be and tell them what’s going on.”

I snapped out of my trance, and realized that most of the villagers had now started referring to me as “the slime freak”... Where did I go wrong?

Chapter 6 Episode 7: A Quick Breather...?

Now that I was officially recognized by the people of this village who had observed our little experiment as the slime freak, everyone called me “slime boy” or “slime kid” as I passed them. Not that I was unhappy with the recognition, but...

“I won’t deny I love slimes, but are they calling me a nerd or something? Here I thought people would be more interested once they got to know what these slimes are capable of... Like, take the poison slime, for example. It’s not just a creature that secretes poison; they can choose *not* to use their poison and wield, say, spears instead. There are many species of slimes that can be extremely useful in many situations.”

“*Normal* poison slimes just spit out poison.”

“You just have to put your trust in slimes... Maybe it’s my lack of salesmanship, or my lack of persuasion?”

“I guess...?”

“Most of the villagers would remember them now, Ryoma. It made things easier to get your plan in motion.”

Fair enough. Just as with any group project, any deviation to their norm of mad salamander hunting process was best communicated not only with the leading adventurer, but with people of the village as well. I would have had to teach those responsible for different groups involved in the hunt, but the crowd at the beach who’d witnessed my slimes streamlined the process for me. Furthermore, the only word of caution I received was to make sure the poison slimes didn’t release their toxin.

During tomorrow’s hunt, the defense of the processing station and its surroundings would be entrusted to me, my familiars, and Sikum’s Pier. If all went well, the other adventurers wouldn’t need to concern themselves with defending the processing station during the hunt, allowing them to run around

a lot less and concentrate on defending the fish.

The team and I were walking down the street in conversation when Peyron suddenly stopped.

“What’s up?” Thane asked.

“Someone’s calling.” Peyron turned around.

I followed his gaze to see a little boy of about seven or eight running towards us.

“Huh? Is that Nikki?”

“Wait up, Slime Guy!”

“Does he mean me?” I asked, but I didn’t know the boy whom I assumed was Nikki. I took a casual step towards the incoming child.

“Wha—”

“Ryoma, look out!”

“Huh?”

“I got something for ya!” The boy threw something in my direction just as Shin and Kei’s pleas for caution reached my ears.



A small, round, and green object came hurling at me, eight appendages flapping in the air—a muddy, octopus-like creature.

“Huh, what?!” I instinctively caught the flying octopus (or whatever it was), and it spewed ink from its mouth.

“Ugh, little bugger was quicker on the draw...”

“You all right, Ryoma?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Nikki!”

“You promised not to mess with anyone from outside the village!”

Seeing me doused in ink, the boy high-tailed it out of there.

Someone else shouted, and I turned to find an elderly woman coming around the corner.

“Oh, it’s you, Gran. Been chasing Nikki?”

“So he *was* here, Kai? I knew it! I’m sorry about your clothes,” she said to me.

I told her it was no problem, and activated Dimension Home. All of the ink on me was swiftly sucked up by a cleaner slime.

“My... That’s very convenient.”

“Don’t you run a laundry shop too, Ryoma?” Thane said.

“I forgot about that. Octo ink shouldn’t be a problem for you.” Peyron smiled.

The tension had lifted, and as I showed the elderly woman how spotless my clothes now were, she seemed to finally show relief.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me,” she said, “I have to go find that little sod and give him what for. If he comes around again...”

“We’ll hold him down until you come back.”

“Thanks a bunch, Shin... Now, where’d he run off to?” the woman asked.

“That way.” She ran off as soon as Kai pointed her in the direction.

She looked to be of considerable age, so I was a bit concerned about how

quickly she ran off.

“Don’t worry about it. Happens all the time.”

Kei explained to me that Nikki was the most mischievous prankster in the entire village. His parents worked during the day, leaving him in the care of retirees... Apparently, he often escaped from his sitter and performed some pranks around the village.

“He usually doesn’t mess with anyone from outside the village.”

“Right, you mentioned something about a promise.”

“Yeah. We drill it into all of our kids not to mess with people coming to our village, not just Nikki. Pranking villagers is one thing.”

“We don’t want them causing trouble for those who came all this way, but we also wouldn’t really know what kind of person they were.”

“Lucky it was you, Ryoma, and you could laugh it off, but if he did that to some nutcase, he could put himself or his friends in danger.”

“The grown-ups try to keep an eye on them, but children need to understand what kind of behavior can be dangerous.”

That seemed like sound parenting advice to me. Then, something wrapped around my wrist.

“What should we do with *this*?” I asked, realizing that I was still holding the octopus (or just octo, as it was called in this world).

“Mm... You don’t have to give it back to him. Want to eat it?”

“I had a feeling it would be edible,” I remarked.

“We usually boil them. It’s good stuff.”

“I’m feeling kinda peckish myself.”

“Me too. But if all we have is that little one...”

“I have just the thing for that!”

“Just the thing?” the team repeated, and I suggested we return to the house before I explained.



When we returned to the kitchen of my new residence, I produced a flat-top grill with rows of round indentations.

“Wow... That’s pretty huge for this kitchen.”

“A magic crystal... Is this a magical item?”

“It is! This is a *takoyaki* maker I had commissioned a metalworker friend of mine for.”

Once I knew I would be getting loads of clever chicken eggs everyday, I figured I’d have a much bigger repertoire of dishes to cook; this made me want all sorts of new cooking equipment, so I asked the Dinome workshop to make them for me.

The *takoyaki* maker was just one example. I also had them make *imagawayaki* molds, an *okonomiyaki* plate and a *yakisoba* plate...and that was just my flat-top collection. Considering how excited I was about them, I didn’t mind that they all came industrial-sized; I sketched up a food stand like you’d see at a festival (where such things would commonly be used for commercial purposes in Japan) when describing the equipment to the metalworkers.

“Do you have enough ingredients? You can use anything we have here.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think I can make do with what I have. I could use something for the broth, though.”

“Broth...? What about these?” Kai produced various dried fish from the pantry. “And this too.”

“What’s in the bottle?” I asked.

“Fish gravy. Made from fish, obviously. We use it in all sorts of dishes.”

“Fish gravy... Maybe it’s— Uh, do you mind if I try some?”

“Sure.”

I opened the bottle, and dripped a small amount onto the back of my hand. It ran more fluidly than I expected, so I quickly licked it off. The taste of salt and concentrated umami seeped into my mouth... *It’s fish sauce!* Since it didn’t

have too much of a bite, and it was easy to cook out the bitterness, I used to use it as a secret ingredient in my cooking all the time. Was this why I kept feeling nostalgic about the soup they were serving me? Whatever it was, the addition of the dried fish and fish sauce would allow me to make something great!

First, I slaughtered the octo and handed it to a cleaner slime to have it get the dirt, ink, and mucus off of the meat. Meanwhile, I began preparing the broth by boiling water. I salted the boiling water, then threw in the cleaned octopus after massaging it thoroughly. I watched as its tentacles curled in and its color turned from green to a vibrant red... Now it looked indistinguishable from an octopus, and perfectly delicious. If only I could get more...

“Can you catch these octo from the lake too?” I asked the team, now relaxing in the living room. “I didn’t see any this morning.”

“What? We catch octo in the forest, not the lake.”

“Oh, the forest... Wait, the forest?!”

“Why so surprised? Where else would you see an octo?”

“They can be on treetops, inside trees, in the mud... Depends on the species, but they’re all on land.”

“I thought you knew, since you seem to know how to cook it.”

“Do you have octo that live in the water in your homeland, Ryoma?”

Apparently the octo was a land animal, unlike the octopus. I suppose they couldn’t have been *too* similar.

I skewered the octo to confirm it was cooked well enough, and pulled it out of the pot. All I had to do now was chop it up, and make a dough out of an abundance of eggs, flour, wheat starch (which I had sneakily refined with alchemy) and the fish broth!

I started up the magical flat-top and poured the dough into the indents once it was heated up. The only other ingredient would be the octo. I used chopsticks to shape and flip each bubble of dough, ensuring that they were baking fluffy and golden brown.

Once they were completely done, I arranged them on a plate with a side of dipping sauce made from broth, fish sauce, and seasonings.

“Here they are,” I announced. “*Akashiyaki!*” Albeit with fish sauce and broth in lieu of the usual steak sauce, of course. I was curious how they would turn out when made from this world’s ingredients.

Thane was the first to pick one up. “Hm... It’s very soft. Kind of slime-shaped.” He dipped it in the sauce, and popped it right into his mouth.

“Ooh, that’s good! Super hot, though!”

“Maybe because you dunked it in your mouth in one go... It is really good,” Shin agreed.

“It melts in my mouth... It’s certainly an expansive flavor. Great texture on the octo chunks as well.”

“You hear that, Ryoma? He loves it,” Kai explained. I had been worried since Peyron’s expression didn’t change upon eating one.

“It has a nice flavor to it. These would make a great snack,” Kei noted.

The dish proved popular with the team, as the stack of octo spheres depleted fast. I decided to join them. The umami of the egg, the broth, and the fish sauce made for a gentle flavor and texture that would warm you right up. The perfect snack for a cold day...

“Anyone home?! Kai?! Kei?!” A frantic voice interrupted us just as I began to unwind, accompanied by a loud banging on the door.

As I choked on my food, Kai and Kei shared a look and opened the door to reveal the same elderly woman from earlier. “Kai! Kei! Did you— Is he—”

“Calm down, Gran. Take some deep breaths first.”

“Slow down and tell us what’s wrong.”

“Where’s Nikki? Have you seen him?”

“Not since the last time we saw you.”

“Nope. We didn’t see him on the way home, and he hasn’t been over... What happened?”

The woman took a deep breath, and managed to choke out two words. “He’s gone.”

Chapter 6 Episode 8: Secret Lair

“Did you find him?!”

“No, and I’m guessing you haven’t either.”

“Where’d that little punk go?”

Adults were constantly weaving in and out of the plaza in the center of the village searching for Nikki, with the members of Sikum’s Pier among them.

“Any luck, Ryoma?!”

“No, Thane... There aren’t any boats on the lake which are close to the village. I saw a few fishing boats from other ports, but no children on board any of them. Plus there were no children, nor any carriages that could hide a child, along the road that leads out of the village.”

I had also asked the limour birds to help, sharing our fields of vision so I could search the outskirts of the village from the sky...but the search so far had been to no avail.

“Got it... Oh, Peyron! How’d it go?”

“All of the village boats are accounted for, and there are no boats from outside docked today.”

“So there’s no way he’s out on the lake?”

Nikki had apparently been last seen shortly after throwing the octo at me. He had been caught and scolded, to which he responded by retorting and running away. Four hours had passed since then, and the winter sky was rapidly darkening.

“Maybe he was kidnapped or something...”

“He’s never been out this late before...”

“Never?”

“I know he can be out of hand, but he’d always come home before dark. Even

when he knew he was in trouble.”

“He knew the important rules. It’s not like we were all a bunch of goody-two-shoes when we were kids either. When you told him not to do something because it was dangerous, he’d listen. So we’d usually just let him off with a smack on the head and a good talking-to.”

Hopefully, he was just throwing a tantrum and hiding somewhere, but we couldn’t discount the very real possibility that something had happened to him.

“I’m sorry, if I had just kept him with me...”

“My son’s the one to blame. It’s not your fault.”

“That little idiot! He never wants to face the consequences when he does something stupid! I swear, when I get ahold of him, I’ll...!”

I turned towards the direction of that heated exchange to find a relatively young couple whom I assumed to be Nikki’s parents. Concealed behind them was the elderly woman from earlier, putting her hands together in prayer towards an ancient, weathered shrine of the plaza. Tears rolled down her face in clear concern and remorse.

I wanted nothing more than to find Nikki as soon as possible, but if he couldn’t be found in the village, on the travel road, or near the lake, the only place left was the evergreen forest which surrounded the village in nearly all directions. I tried redirecting Sechs and Fünf from searching the road towards the forest, but the dense leaves prevented searching from above and flying safely through the woods; it wasn’t an environment where the limour birds could effectively help me. We needed something, anything to go on.

What about my own childhood experiences?

I thought there might have been a few occasions when I had contemplated running away, especially after dad and I started butting heads, but though I thought it over, I knew I wouldn’t have had anywhere to go. I would have ended up in the neighborhood park or something; a kid could only go so far on his own. Even when I thought I had walked a great distance, I was never that far from home.

I did hear about a kid who ran away from home to sleep at a friend’s place for

a while... I didn't have a friend who did anything like that, but I think kids tended to stick to places they were familiar with. What was a place in the forest that Nikki knew well...?

"Thane, Peyron. About the octo we had for lunch. You said they live in the forest, right?"

"Huh? Yeah, what about it?"

"Where did Nikki get the one he threw at me? I doubt any grown-up would have given it to him, knowing how much of a prankster he is. If he acquired the octo on his own, I think he would have gone into the forest and caught it before coming to us on the street."

"That makes sense..."

"Now that I think about it, he's pulled that trick more often than others, but I've never heard of him nicking an octo from someone's kitchen or anything... Let me ask."

Thane ran over to Nikki's parents and grandmother, then soon returned with them in tow.

"You're right, Ryoma! Nikki always catches his own octo."

"Do you know where he gets them?"

"He usually goes east, I think," his mother answered. "He's been volunteering to get firewood whenever we run low, so I think he catches them then."

"That nimwit's in the eastern forest?" Concern had overcome the anger in Nikki's father's voice.

"I can't say for sure, but if I were a child—I mean, if I were Nikki, I would hide in a secluded place I was familiar with."

Speaking from my experience of hunting in the forest of Gana day after day, hunting was not as simple as wandering into a forest willy-nilly and stumbling onto some game. Most animals were quick to run away at the first sight, sound, or scent of a human. You had to approach from downwind, or find their path and set a trap. And experience was the only thing that would let you yield consistent results.

Nikki had caught a good number of octo for his pranks, so I suspected that he was familiar with some sort of octo hotspot in the eastern forest. Of course, this was all based on what I would do in his shoes...

“Good enough. We don’t have any other leads to go on. Beats standing around here.”

“Perfect timing. There’s the rest of the team.”

“All right, let’s go!”

“Huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Thane? Care to explain?”

“I’ll explain on the way. We’re going to the eastern forest.”

“I’m coming too!”

We headed to the eastern forest, filling in the remaining three members of Sikum’s Pier as we went.



By the time we arrived, the sun had completely set, plunging the forest into complete darkness.

“If there is an octo hotspot, it’s going to be pretty deep in the woods.”

“Makes sense. Octo tend to be secluded from civilization.”

Kei and Shin began narrowing down our search area.

“I see. Is there a boundary in the forest where Nikki isn’t allowed to pass?”

“That’d be Rock Point,” Thane answered.

“It’s a rocky cliff that juts out over the lake,” Peyron explained.

“Let’s start somewhere pretty deep into the woods. Don’t get lost, Ryoma, you can’t see much in here,” Kai said as he led the charge into the forest.

We weaved through the dense woods, somewhat illuminating them with light magic.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“What...? Are you sure you heard something?”

“I heard it too. Couldn’t tell if it was Nikki.”

“Could be monsters. Be careful.” We followed Shin’s lead towards the sound until it was loud enough for us to decipher its source.

“Goblins, I’m pretty sure. Sounds like five of them, but they seem rather excited about something.”

Despite the glare of our light magic, it didn’t sound like the goblins were approaching us. In fact, their attention seemed to be drawn to something else.

“Excited...? Do you think he’s there?”

“I can’t hear a kid...”

“Nikki’d better not be with them...”

“We can’t ignore goblins this close to the village anyway. Everyone ready?”

“Good thing we brought our weapons. Never know what could happen.”

The five of them drew their weapons, as I joined them with an iron slime for a shortsword.

We inched forward until we could finally see the goblins surrounding a particularly large tree, and they started approaching with a screech as soon as they saw us.

“Here they come! Stay sharp!”

Alas, the goblins were unarmed and Sikum’s Pier were too experienced to struggle against a gang of goblins... The scuffle lasted no more than a few seconds. Once all goblins had fallen into the pool of their own blood, silence was restored in the woods.

“Well, doesn’t look like there’s any more of ’em.”

“What about Nikki?”

“Hey, Nikki! Are you there?!” Thane called.

Then, we heard a voice in the distance.

“Hey, did you—”

“Yeah, I heard that!”

“Where is it coming from?”

“Come on out...! Where are you?!”

We looked all around us, even up in the trees, but we found no child. The voice, however, had been unmistakable. Nowhere around or above us... Could it be?

“Earth Sonar...!”

I activated a spell I had developed to search underground. The spell struggled to cover as large a distance as it usually did, perhaps due to the muddy soil. Still...

“What is it?”

“What’s wrong, Ryoma?”

“There’s a large, open space in the ground below this tree. I checked with magic.”

“What?!”

“Open space? Is there an entrance to it somewhere?”

“There’s a hole in the ground here!”

“Are you serious?!”

“It’s too tight for me to go in, and I can’t see anything through it...”

Peyron had spotted a gap in the roots of the mangrove-like tree.

“May I? I might be able to squeeze in,” I said.

Amidst the tangled mass of roots, there was an opening showing. I peered into the opening, which resembled some sort of nest, to find that the tight tunnel continued rather far ahead. I barely managed to squeeze into it, even in my child-sized body, and crawled onward.

“This reminds me of the self-defense force experience.”

Back in Japan, there were some companies which had implemented a boot

camp experience for new hires. My own company was among them, so naturally, my boss had ordered me to spend a day off experiencing the real thing. To be honest, it was much less grueling than a regular day in the office. I'm sure they had gone easy on us since it wasn't a *real* boot camp, but I had more than enough stamina to get through the day, and all of their directions were crystal-clear.

My team lead had always given us unclear directions, so I always had to double-check after the directions were given to figure out what I had to do. He had always irritably demanded that I understand things the first time I was told, and held it against me if my interpretations of his vague orders were not precisely as he had imagined. Worst of all, even though I had done exactly what he wanted me to, his orders had often been incorrect to begin with, making my work useless.

In stark contrast, the drill sergeant's orders were very precise. Furthermore, no one was ever chastised for following orders; sincerely, I thought it was the best thing ever. At the same time, I realized that no one could tolerate working for my company if they grew accustomed to clear directions like that.

After my boot camp experience, I wrote up a report delicately stating that implementing the boot camp experience for new hires would go against the company's best interest... Though I certainly didn't have any qualms with the SDF or anything.

"Wow..." I noted with surprise what came into view at the end of the gently curving tunnel, illuminated by my spell—a door. It was a simple but unmistakably man-made door, which looked like a row of branches tied together.

"I see. This isn't just a tunnel, it's Nikki's secret lair... No wonder we couldn't find him."

I called out to him, not bothering to hide my amazement at how he managed to craft a hideout in a place like this. "Hello? It's Ryoma... Well, I guess you probably don't know my name, but I'm the Slime Guy. Come on out, Nikki. I know you're in there."

There was no response, but then I heard some shifting from across the door.

Since the door wasn't fitted with a lock or anything I carefully pushed it in, and it opened quite easily.

"Nikki!"

Chapter 6 Episode 9: An Understanding

Nikki's secret lair had its own light source, but it was much dimmer than my magical one, which explained why Nikki was squinting at me from the other side of the base, hugging his knees. He didn't move from where he was, but he seemed unharmed.

"Looks like you're okay, thank goodness. Are you hurt?"

"No..."

"Are you sure?"

"Er... I twisted my ankle when I got away, but I can still walk..."

"Okay." I assumed he "got away" from the goblins by scurrying in here. "Can you show me that ankle? I know a little bit of healing magic. Not only that, but the goblins are taken care of, so we need to get your ankle fixed and get you back home."

But Nikki pulled back his right foot in response.

"No..."

"Pardon me?"

"I don't...want to go home," Nikki muttered, just as I heard Shin asking me something from the entrance of the tunnel that I couldn't make out.

He doesn't want to go home...? First things first, I'd better let the team know.

"*Whisper.* Can everyone hear me? This is Ryoma. It's too difficult to speak to each other through the tunnel, so I'm sending my voice to you through wind magic."

"...can... hear you...!"

"Good. I found Nikki. He looks fine, and doesn't seem to have any major wounds. But there's a problem..."

I explained his resistance and I could hear more voices from the outside, all

blending together so it was difficult to make out anything. Judging by their tone, I assumed they were calling for Nikki to come out... Their efforts seemed to trigger the opposite response of what they wanted.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Nikki cried. “I’m not coming home, no matter what anyone says! Nobody’s gonna believe me even if I talk it out anyway!”

Despite his bravado, Nikki buried his head further into his knees, and he sounded like he was going to cry.

We were in a small, enclosed space, so it would have been beyond easy to detain Nikki. I could just throw him in the Dimension Home and have my slimes hold him until I handed him over to his parents back at the village. But I had a feeling that doing so wasn’t going to deter him from doing this again. Since he made this secret lair all on his own, if he ran away from his fate once, he’d probably just as well do it again.

“Guys, I’m sorry, but I’m going to try and talk to him on my own. Can you give us some time?” I asked.

After a while (and a conversation among the team, I presumed) Shin gave me the green light to talk things over with Nikki. I thanked him and approached the boy.

“They said we have a little bit of time, so let’s try to calm ourselves down first... Did you build this all by yourself, Nikki? It’s really impressive.” While the entrance was a crawl space, the space was large enough for me to just barely stand up without hitting my head.

It looked like he dug out the dirt from between the cluster of roots, and even cut some roots in the way to create this space. He had taken green branches and woven them through the roots to strengthen the structure and prevent dirt from flooding the lair. It wasn’t a perfect job by any means, but it must have been a major project for someone his age to undertake without magic.

“I used to live somewhere like this. It was deep in a fores—”

“Just shut up already... I don’t need your flattery. That’s not what you’re here to talk about anyway.”

“Right...”

Looks like my attempt at breaking the ice didn't go over well. Still, I *was* genuinely impressed by how he built this place...

"I'll be straight with you, then."

"What? You're just going to tell me to go home. You just did."

"Well, I wanted to hear you out first."

"Hear me out...? Why? So you can tell me to go home?"

"You were just yelling about how there was no point in talking it out if no one was going to believe you. You want someone to listen to you, right?"

I mentioned this in the hope that he could calm down a little by getting whatever it was off of his chest. His reaction was more intense than I had expected: Nikki, who was barely looking me in the eyes up until now, leapt to his feet and stared at me. Seeing this contrast from before, it made me think that he might be easier to understand than I had presumed.

"Why?"

"Why... I'm just curious, I suppose. I mean, I barely know you. Still, I came all the way out here looking for you... I'd like to hear what you have to say. No stone unturned. I think we'll both feel better about this whole thing if we can just talk it out."

"Still... You've heard I pull pranks on people all the time, right?"

I had, of course... But the fact that he mentioned it now showed that he was well aware of his infamy. Combining that with his comment that no one would believe him, and how he'd promised not to prank outsiders and followed the rules he was supposed to... Maybe my initial assumption was wrong.

"You didn't mean to pull a prank on me, did you?"

Nikki hesitated, not knowing how to respond. I took that as an affirmative response.

"In that case, I'm sorry," I added, "I thought that was your intention. But people told me about you beforehand, so something seemed odd about that to me."

I was wondering why he broke the rule to not prank outsiders, since he'd always followed that rule before. Thinking back on the exchange, he threw me the octo as he yelled "I got something for ya."

"Taking what you said at face value, you were just trying to give me that octo. So my guess is, the octo happened to ink me when I caught it, which made it look like you pulled a prank on me. I'm not sure why you gave me that octo, but...am I right so far?" I asked gently after presenting my deduction.

Nikki began to slowly explain. "Today... I saw a whole bunch of slimes on the beach. I thought it was kind of cool how they moved around all weird and stuff."

He saw them? And he thought they were cool...? Perhaps he would become a fellow man of culture in due time, but I kept that thought to myself and let him speak for the time being.

"So... I was curious. I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't know you... Then I remembered how my mom always gets stuff from people who come to the village for the first time. You bring a gift when you introduce yourself, right?"

"Oh, I see. The octo was meant to be that gift... Why did you choose an octo for me?"

"I thought you'd like it, since it looked like a slime. Your slimes even had tentacles like octo do."

"Huh... I see," I said, stifling my laughter. I never would have expected that.

In fact, both slimes and octo were soft and gelatinous, and my slimes did extend parts of their bodies like tentacles. I guess they did kind of look alike.

"That makes sense; thanks for telling me. So you got in trouble because your family thought you pulled a prank on me, right?"

Guilt spread across his face. "I'm sorry for getting ink all over you and running away when it happened... It's like a habit of when I *do* pull pranks, and that's why I threw the octo too... I know I shouldn't have done *those* things, so I listened to them yelling at me at first, but then I... I...!" Nikki began to cry as he relived the memory of being scolded.

“There, there... It’s okay. I’m not sure how else to put this, but take your time. I’m listening...” I offered him a glass of water I produced from my item box. I continued listening to him, piecing together some parts of the story that got lost in the sobbing here and there.

Apparently, Nikki had once been blamed for something he didn’t do: ruining treats that an elder had prepared for some of the children. The culprit, another child, had ruined the sweets by accident, but tried to pin it on Nikki (who already had a reputation as a prankster) for fear of being scolded. Nikki was blamed for it at first, but the elders of the village and his parents had defended him, trusting Nikki’s claim. The other child eventually confessed, and the grownups had told Nikki not to be afraid to defend himself when he hadn’t done anything wrong. Moreover, he believed that grownups would listen to him if he told the truth.

“But this time, they didn’t?”

“Right. I said I didn’t mean to do it, but they just yelled at me not to make excuses. They wouldn’t listen... I tried over and over again, and I couldn’t stand it... I was running away before I knew it.”

“I see.” So he ran away because he felt unheard. I remember feeling that way when I was a kid sometimes, and I understood where he was coming from.

“That’s all the more reason to go home and talk it out, I think.”

“What’s the point? We’re in this mess because they wouldn’t listen to me. Why would they listen to me now when they didn’t care earlier?”

“It might not have worked out earlier. But why don’t we give it one more try, with a level head? If you’d like, I can help. For example... If they try to smack you without hearing you out, I’ll stop them.”

“You will?”

“I’m an adventurer, after all; I’m pretty tough. I can protect you from any physical harm. Besides, your parents and the other grownups in the village are only upset because they’re worried about you. We’re the only ones who’ve made it here, but there are a lot of people looking for you. We decided to try the woods because we couldn’t find you anywhere around the village. Once you

and your family calm down, you can talk it out.”

“You think so?”

It was undeniable that everyone was worried about Nikki. “They wouldn’t try to scold you or look for you unless they cared about you.”

It was natural for those being scolded to dislike the experience; I’d had someone snap back at me once about how “it must be nice, getting to say whatever you damn well please.” I’d countered by saying that scolding someone takes a lot of energy. It could make the relationship awkward or contemptuous. In reality, I believed that there was almost nothing to gain personally from going through the ordeal of scolding. Who would bother doing that to someone they didn’t care about. We had a saying in Japan—*be grateful that someone cares enough to scold you*.

“Fine... I’ll go home,” Nikki agreed, albeit reluctantly.

I was surprised at how smoothly I was able to convince him when I remembered how he had admitted himself that he was sorry for covering me in ink and running away. Maybe he actually wanted to come home, and just didn’t know how.

“Slime Guy?”

“Oh, right.” In any case, it was great that he was ready to come home. “You said you twisted your ankle, right? Let’s take care of that before we go. Can I have a look?”

I examined his right ankle; it was a little swollen, but there was nothing wrong with the bone. An easy fix with the novice healing spell. After quickly treating the ankle, I reported to the others via wind magic that I had convinced Nikki to come home.

“All right. I want to explain the situation to them, so I’ll be waiting for you out there.”

The tunnel was too narrow for both of us to crawl through at the same time. Trusting that Nikki would follow me on his own, I crawled back out of his secret lair.

Chapter 6 Episode 10: April Showers Bring May Flowers

The next morning, I awoke to the sensation of the crisp, morning air.

“Good morning,” I called as I walked up to the sink.

“Good morning, Ryoma.”

“You’re up, I see. That was quite a fiasco yesterday.”

Kai and Kei were there to greet me, also getting ready.

Naturally, we were still talking about what happened last night. After I left Nikki’s secret lair, things went off rather smoothly. Nikki came right out after me, and even though he seemed to become tenser as we got closer to the village, he didn’t run off again. It helped a lot that Thane and Kei had hurried back to the village as I was coming out of the lair, bringing the news to the whole village that Nikki was safe. Well, except for the part where his father tried to smack him upside the head as soon as we returned to the plaza, the whole thing went off without a hitch. They were able to just talk it out.

“How’s your face doing, Ryoma?”

“I’ll live. Nothing serious.”

“Good. We were all surprised when you dove between them.”

“Right. I know you said you promised to keep Nikki from being hit, but still...”

“Well... Seeing how worried his father was, I didn’t want to just pin him down or anything.”

“Did you have to stop his fist with your *face*, though?”

I could only laugh in response to that. We were simply happy that Nikki was safe.

We finished getting ready and had breakfast before heading out into the streets in the pre-dawn dark once more. On our way to the shore, I spotted a

face I had become familiar with.

“Wait, isn’t that Nikki and his parents over there?” I asked.

“That’s them.”

“What are they doing out here?”

The family seemed to spot us and gave us a big wave as they approached.

“Good morning, Slime Guy!”

“Good morning, Nikki.” I greeted his parents as well.

“Thank you so much for finding our boy last night,” his mother said. “We never got the chance to thank you properly.”

“Well, it *was* pitch-dark by the time we came back,” Kai said.

Kei chimed in as well. “We did get held up with all that talking.”

Nikki’s father faced me. “Doesn’t matter. I got to thank you face to face.”

“So that’s why you’re here... Well, thank you,” I answered.

“Why are *you* thanking *them*?” Kai interjected and we shared a small laugh.

“Guess what, Slime Guy? I’m going to work at the processing station, starting today.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

“He kept the whole village worried yesterday, so we’re going to have him help there in the mornings for a while as punishment and a token of apology,” his mother explained.

“We were waiting for him to grow a little bigger, but he’s apparently got too much energy. He can handle water duty, at least.”

“Now that’s one heck of a punishment, Nikki,” Kai remarked.

“Why’s that?”

Kei explained, “It’s just getting water from the well, but they use a lot of water every day, so we’re talking a lot more than a few hundred trips. The grownups work water duty too, and they take turns. It’s hard labor so most kids are a bit older than Nikki when they start.”

“I see... You got this, Nikki.”

“You too, Slime Guy!”

We smiled at each other, and the group turned to the shore. Nikki held his parents’ hands along the way, excited for the morning ahead... Maybe they had more to talk about last night after we parted at the plaza.



“See you later, Slime Guy! Won’t you teach me about slimes after work?!”

“You got it. See you later.”

Once we reached the shore, the team and I waved Nikki off and went to prepare for the hunt. Of course, all there was to prepare was to summon the slimes and station them. That’s why I wanted to be very thorough with it.

“First wave!” the leader called, and the crowd on the shore erupted into action as I was double-checking the slimes’ conditions around the processing station. “Wave,” of course, meant a horde of mad salamanders.

“Ready, Ryoma?!” Thane shouted above the crowd.

“We’re all set!”

“Let’s do this!” He took his position, and I hurried to mine.

With the processing station behind me, I looked over the slimes sprawled over the beach. They were quiet on the surface, but I could sense their excitement as they braced for battle.

I began to hear the fishermen’s call that informed me they had begun fighting the salamanders as they pulled in the seine.

I waited several minutes trying to steady my heartbeat.

Just as the first batch of fish was carried into the processing station, the first salamander came ashore.

“Here it comes!” Kei warned from his position at the edge of our team’s perimeter.

“I see it! If it breaks through, it’s all yours!”

The salamander darted straight across the beach towards the fishermen hauling the catch...when it suddenly flopped over. I couldn't hear its cry, but it was clear from its violent thrashing that it was in agony.

"It worked," I muttered. The first part of the defense plan was the line of iron and metal slime keeping the salamanders from passing. These slimes had that weakness of not being able to maneuver well on the sand. The solution was to keep them stationary. I had them stretch thin and hide under the sand like rays, telling them to form part of their body into a harpoon when a salamander steps on them.

It worked perfectly. The salamander stepped right onto a spearhead that wasn't there a moment ago, and started thrashing to pull it out. The slime, however, pushed its appendage deeper into the wound, entangling itself around the creature and weighing it down.

The first salamander was slain without even reaching the spears of the poison slimes. In the meantime, ten or so salamanders that followed were now writhing on the beach, each ensnared by a metal or iron slime.

The leader of the adventurers approached me. "You almost feel sorry for them."



“Good morning.”

“Just came to check on you, but it’s looking good.”

“More or less. The trapped salamanders will steadily grow weaker. If more keep coming, some of them will even get trampled.”

“It’s part of the plan if they climb over the fallen. And they’re going to mitigate any large waves with dark magic, right?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered. The leader stayed quiet for a few moments. “Is something on your mind?”

“Hm? I was just thinking, if this plan works well, we could manage with fewer adventurers here.”

Accordingly, this was not the only village attacked by mad salamanders this time of the year. Whenever there’s a surplus of fighters, the leader explained, he had to consider relocating some of them to other villages that were short-handed.

“*If* we have more than enough here, of course. We will never endanger the location we were assigned to first.”

“Makes sense.”

No matter the job, payment demanded responsibility. I really wanted the slimes to do their best for my own betterment too.

“I’ll make a decision after I see how it goes this morning. Show me what you and your slimes can do.”

“Absolutely.”

As more fish were carried to the processing station, more and more salamanders assaulted the line. I saw the leader off and renewed my determination to make this a successful hunt.

Chapter 6 Episode 11: A Surprising Discovery

“Whoa!”

I barely dodged the enormous jaw of a mad salamander, and delivered a blow to its head. Before I could even check whether the strike was fatal, a few more of them rushed me all at once. With the swipe of the staff in my hand, I cleared them away and pressed on through the opening.

I had to move forward—every step and every second counted! With the staff in my hand and a dark slime on my head, I struck down salamander after salamander before finally arriving at the frontline of our defense. Here, we wouldn’t affect the metal and iron slimes.

“Now!” I shouted, and the dark slime on my head answered.

The sun had already risen high above the eastern horizon, but the morning light seemed to fade away, signifying that the dark slime had cast its wide-range attack spell, Dark Mist.

Magic-generated darkness spread out like mist, engulfing the targets. The mist robbed its victims of their strength, rapidly weakening and even killing them. Sure enough, the mad salamanders breaching the shore near me started to slow down, crumbling as if they were buckling at their knees. The mist seemed to have reached the water, as numerous salamander carcasses rose to the surface.

After ten seconds or so, the horde of mad salamanders charging the processing station ceased to be.

“Collections, please!” I called, and the temporarily empty-handed fishermen and adventurers came over the slimes’ defense line and gathered up the salamander carcasses.

The slimes were effective in their defense, but as they couldn’t carry off the slain salamanders, humans needed to come and gather them in between waves. Unlike the previous day, the salamander bodies began to pile up until

the later waves gave up on climbing the mountainous carcasses and began circumventing them. Luckily, Sikum's Pier and I were able to take care of them before they caused any damage.

Good thing I came prepared.

"On the double, men!" the leader of the adventurers shouted. "Their numbers are dwindling, it won't be much longer!"

The crowd responded with an energetic roar, and I returned to running, grabbing a carcass near me.

The morning hunt lasted for another hour.



"Great work today!"

"You too!"

"Great job out there!"

After completely packing up the operation, it was time for lunch. The members of the Pier and I headed to the processing station as we chatted.

"Hey, it's Nikki!"

"They're really putting him to work over yesterday, huh?"

"Don't slack off, now!"

"I know!"

We could hear the adults ahead of us jokingly giving Nikki a hard time.

"Looks like you're hard at work."

"Oh, Slime Guy! Ready for lunch? I'll bring it right over, so take a seat."

"Thank you. Looks like you're doing a great job around here."

"Ha! You're the only one who'd say that."

Nikki rolled his eyes, but soon regained his smile. The grown-ups teasing him almost seemed like a part of the rite of passage. Somewhat relieved, I took a seat nearby and waited, wondering what was for lunch.

“Here you go!”

“Thank you!”

I accepted what Nikki served me in awe. First, a bowl of white rice with the familiar color and fragrance, albeit with grains that were rounder than those back in Japan. Today’s horice soup, served with every meal, was obviously tofu. Combined with grilled fish and a small bowl of pickled vegetables, this truly added up to...

A truly Japanese breakfast of champions!

“Is something wrong?”

“This is rice, isn’t it? I heard that’s an expensive import.”

“Really? We get rice in our village every now and then. Is it that expensive?” Nikki asked.

Shin answered, “Imported rice is expensive, but this rice is made here, by the scientists of our lord. So it isn’t that expensive.”

“That being said, it only became affordable to *our* people a few years ago. It’s a bit of a treat, but I guess it’s just a normal dish for kids of Nikki’s age.”

“You sound like an old man, Thane,” Kei chimed in.

Thane gave him a defeated-looking sneer, even though he was too young to be worried about coming off old, in my opinion.

“I see... So that’s why you have rice here.” I’d heard a few things about Lord Fatoma before I came to the village, but I didn’t know he had things like this in the works.

“So rice is like a new food...” Nikki muttered. “Oh, right! I still have work to do!”

“Okay, I’ll see you later!” I answered.

First, I took a bite of the rice, which was of a stickier texture than the rice in Japan, but perfectly delicious. I switched to the soup that turned out to be tofu. This meal certainly brought back memories.

“You look pretty content.”

“It’s been a long time since I last had these dishes... Can I buy them anywhere?”

“Why don’t you have Nikki show you later?”

“His grandma’s the one making tofu for our village.”

Now that was a great tidbit!

“I promised to meet him later, so I’ll ask him then.”

“Sounds great. Speaking of...” Kai suddenly looked solemn. “The goblins we took out in the forest yesterday—there were five in total, right?”

“Yes, I believe there were...” I turned to the rest of the team, and they concurred.

“I overheard when we were cleaning up this morning that they found a cage in the woods over by the village yesterday.”

That information struck me with a sense of danger, but the other five seemed to be just annoyed.

“Um... Isn’t that kind of a big deal?”

A cage would have been used to capture something. Judging by the way the conversation had flowed, that “something” was goblins. If someone found a cage in the woods, didn’t that mean that someone had intentionally released goblins close to the neighboring village?

Shin answered my curiosity. “You’re right to react that way. Thing is, the same thing happens a few times every year around here. It just becomes a nuisance in time.”

Furthermore, the team suspected nobles in the neighboring land of doing this, as an attack of sorts against Lord Fatoma. Someone must have been behind them, but there was never any trail that led to the culprits. A decent space mage would suffice for leaving the cage open and fleeing the scene.

“Do the lord and the neighboring nobles not get along?”

“It would be more accurate to say they have an unwarranted vendetta against our lord. I don’t know the details about them, but our lord’s a great person,

really down to earth. He works hard to get us rice, for example. I hear about a lot of things he does to make our lives better.”

“The soil around this village isn’t suited for farming, so our village used to survive on hunting and gathering... Children used to starve if the fish dried up. Luckily, our generation’s never had to experience anything like that... We owe that to our lord and his predecessor, from what I’ve heard.”

“I hear that the lord next door is an arrogant show-off, but not ours.”

“I’ve actually heard that he’ll walk around his hometown, looking for good restaurants and eating among his own people... He’s not your typical nobleman.”

He certainly sounded like someone well respected by his subjects.

“In any case, the cage is nothing new. The lord will hear about it in due time, then send someone to look into the matter, and we’ll just have to watch our backs for a while. Same as always.”

“Tomorrow’s hunt is a bigger concern for me right now.”

“You mean the part about sending some of the adventurers off? They said they’re still talking about it...but it looks like that’s a given by now.”

“You heard that today during the hunt, right?”

“There was a lot of downtime when we weren’t picking up carcasses. If we just time our collections right, we could manage with less people... What do you think, Ryoma?”

“I agree, Kei. The slimes can prevent them from attacking the processing station, and that would amount to good training for me as well.”

Since I could leave most of the work to the slimes, I could focus on training myself. Even the carcass gathering could serve as a workout for me as I repeat it, or even practice for space magic.

As the saying goes, if you love your job, you’ll never work a day in your life!

I voiced my excitement, and the team began to laugh. When I asked them what was so funny, they just said I was a hard worker. And they gave me a rather strange look... Not that I sensed any malice or anything from them.



The conversation shifted to small talk, and soon enough, we finished our lunch.

“See you later, everyone.”

I saw the Sikum’s Pier crew off, and waited at the dining hall for Nikki to get off work, in order to fulfill my promise of teaching him about slimes.

But how should I approach this? I wanted to make it fun, since he showed interest. On the other hand, I don’t want to be too pushy. Such are the plights of spreading the good word...

“Uh, Ryoma? Watch yourself... Is he even listening to us?”

“Lights are on, but nobody’s home. He’ll be back by dinner. May’s there too.”

I thought Kai and Kei were calling me... Maybe it was my imagination. I looked around, and pretty much everyone had left the dining hall.

Chapter 6 Episode 12: The Boy Has Talent

“...and that’s about it,” I concluded.

That afternoon, I had introduced Nikki to one of each type of slime I had, profiling their strengths and uses, as well as giving a summary of some of their evolution processes. He was still staring at the showcase of slimes on the table before us in the now-deserted dining hall. I thought I had done well in piquing his interest.

“Do you have any questions, or a particular slime you’re interested in?” I asked.

“Um... The medicine slime! We have to go to a village nearby if we get seriously hurt or sick, so he’d be great to have around.”

He had a much more practical interest than I had expected.

“It’s true that they can excrete fluids that act as a disinfectant or ointment, so they’d be convenient for treating minor injuries. On the other hand, medicine slimes can be harder to handle because they can also excrete poison, and you have to feed them poison and medicine. Personally, I’d recommend healer slimes instead. They can use healing magic, and only need water and sun.”

“Okay... But slimes that use magic are rare and expensive, right? How do you have five different types of them?”

“The ones I have all evolved in my care, but I’ve heard that people spend years searching for just one of them. An acquaintance of mine who’s knowledgeable about monsters once told me that he didn’t know anyone else who had all five types. Now, I don’t know how much people would pay for them, but there are a lot of nobles willing to pay a premium for things other people don’t have. Maybe slimes are a relatively easy exotic pet to have, something they can brag about.”

“I get why they’re expensive, but why would anyone want a rare pet just to show them off?”

“Maybe you’ll understand someday. But if you never do, there’s nothing wrong with that either.”

It was human nature to compare oneself to other people. Nikki would grow up and battle with that urge too, just like the rest of us. And if he didn’t, well, more power to him.

“Huh... You said that they evolve differently depending on what they eat. Would they turn into a fish slime or something if they ate fish all the time? Are fish slimes, like, a thing?”

“There are so many slime evolutions that even researchers don’t know all of them... I don’t know if fish slimes exist, but there’s always a chance they do. Like, the only difference between my metal and iron slimes is that one ate dirt with numerous metal sediments, while the other only ate iron sediments. Going by the example of the iron slime, there’s a great chance that there will be different slimes depending on the metals they eat; copper, tin, lead and so on.”

I’d previously theorized that their evolutionary results differed based on their diet, but recently, I’d been starting to second-guess that theory.

“So your theory was wrong?”

“I wouldn’t quite say that. Let me put it another way.”

Throughout my experience, especially when it came to the sticky, poison, acid, and cleaner slimes that I had been working with for a long time, I had been able to control their diet and recreate specific evolutions. This made me believe that a slime’s diet did, in fact, affect its evolution.

“But I’m missing something... I’m thinking that their diet is just one of the conditions that determines their evolution, and that there are more variables involved. Take the weed slime, for example. Some of them have started eating poisonous weeds and herbs. I would assume they would evolve into poison weed slimes or herb slimes, but...”

“Wait, don’t you feed slimes poisonous weeds to evolve them into poison slimes?”

“Exactly! Previously, the slimes which ate poisonous weeds had always evolved into poison slimes. I’m still waiting for the new group of weed slimes to

evolve, but if they don't evolve into poison slimes from eating the same feed, there have to be other factors involved. Of course, it's entirely possible that poison slimes can evolve into more specialized slimes, like metal slimes evolving into iron slimes. I feed bones to my acid slimes too, but none of them have evolved into bone slimes. I think they evolved with an advanced digestive system..."

"You sound so excited about not knowing things."

"The fun part is figuring out things I don't know yet—observing, hypothesizing, experimenting... And if I realize that I was wrong, I accept that and start the process over again. That makes it all the more fun when I finally figure it out."

"Huh..."

Maybe that last bit went over Nikki's head... I was trying to break it down for him, but I got a little carried away.

"Hm... Let's see. Have you ever been excited to learn something new, or to be able to do something you couldn't do before? It doesn't have to be slime-related."

"Yeah, I think so. Like when I first climbed a tree, or when I finished building my secret lair... And I'm having fun right now too!"

He was having fun right now? Maybe Nikki had a bright future ahead of him after all.

"Then, do you want to try looking after some slimes?"

"You wouldn't mind, would you?"

"Of course not. They mostly just need food and water, but it can take a lot of time to prepare those for all of the different species. Slimes waiting to evolve need special diets as well, so you'd be doing me a big favor. I have some stock with me, but I'd like to try out some things around here..."

"Let's ask my mom! We'll at least have some garbage!"

With that, Nikki and I set off scavenging around the village.



“That’s quite the pile we’ve accumulated...” I remarked, seeing the mountain of junk we had collected in a portion of the plaza where I had asked to stash it for the time being.

Nikki was definitely not shy, and had run up to every house we came across, asking if we could take anything they didn’t need. Maybe the villagers felt more comfortable answering Nikki’s request than they would have mine. I was certainly more comfortable letting Nikki do most of the talking. When I showed the pile to the slimes I had summoned, some of them showed interest, indicating a new type of feed that I hadn’t thought of!

“Wow...” Nikki muttered. “That’s a lot of slimes. They’re all yours? Space magic is something else.”

“No time to keep gawking. Let’s go through the pile and see which slime wants what. We have to get a move on if we want to get through it all by sundown.”

“You got it!”

Together, we started sorting through our findings. The kids that had been playing in the plaza, as well as quite a few grown-ups, were watching us from a distance, but we didn’t pay them any attention. The whole village already knew what we were doing anyway.

I started with the scraps produced at the processing station, consisting of the inedible parts of various fish, like innards and bones. The scavenger slimes, acid slimes, and one of the bloody slimes responded to these. The scavenger slimes were after the rotting guts and feces within the digestive tract, while the acid slimes wanted the bones, similar to their usual diet. The one bloody slime, however, was after some innards (probably the blood) while the other two showed no interest; there was a chance the interested slime was approaching evolution. The question was what exactly it was after. I gathered up a few parts that it showed interest in, and there was no uniformity when it came to the type of fish, or any specific organ. I even showed it multiple samples of the same organ and same type of fish, but it only wanted certain examples of them.

“I think I’ve figured it out,” Nikki said as I was trying to piece this mystery together.

“Really?! What do you think?”

“Must be parasites... We have to be careful of them this time of the year. Mom and dad said there are a few fish that are riskier than the rest. All of the scraps you picked up belong to those fish.”

“Parasites, huh...? *Appraisal.*”

Pile of Fish Guts

A collection of innards from varying fish species. Each contains the egg or larva of a parasite that inhabits Lake Latoin.

“Eureka! That has to be it, Nikki! I cast an appraisal spell, and all of these have a parasite in them!”

“Really?” He let out a gleeful chuckle. “But parasites...”

“Is something wrong?”

“They just ruin the fish. There’s nothing good about them.”

True, parasites were a nuisance to most people, and doubly so if those people lived in a fishing village.

“Still, I managed to gather all this based on the slime’s reactions. I didn’t know they all had parasites until I cast my spell... In other words, there’s a chance that we can use slimes that eat parasites to determine which fish have parasites and which don’t.”

Nikki’s eyes widened as a few mutterings came from the adult onlookers.

“That’s it! If we could tell which fish are clear of parasites, that’d be safer!” Nikki yelled.

“If we can know for sure, I could try eating one raw...”

“Don’t even try it, dear. Who’s going to take care of you when it makes you sick?”

“I wouldn’t do it this time of the year! But maybe in summer...”

“Nikki,” I asked, “do people eat fish raw around these parts?”

“During the time of year when there are less parasites, yeah. Dad likes it; he says you gotta be a fisherman to do it. But he gets sick from it every year. It’s never completely safe.”

“I see.” I was reminded of the historical accounts of people who dared to eat puffer fish in the Edo period, when it was outlawed because of its danger of lethal poisoning... Albeit with less gravitas, since it sounded like eating parasite-infested fish wouldn’t kill them.

More importantly, how would the bloody slime evolve after consuming parasites? Would it enter the human body...? Since it was made out of blood, would that be a form of transfusion? Come to think of it, bloody slimes *did* enter the body through the wound when sucking the blood of its prey. But the blood of the game didn’t congeal, though I did hear that the blood could congeal when mixed with a different type. But what blood types would slimes...

“...Hey! Slime Guy!”

“Oh, sorry, Nikki. Just thinking about things.”

“So I noticed. Anyway, we know that one likes parasites. Let’s move on.”

“Right!”

We had barely made a dent in the mountain of garbage before us, but it looked as precious to me as a dragon’s hoard. It wouldn’t be too long before I could confirm that it was just as valuable too...

Chapter 6 Episode 13: A Glimpse at Infinite Possibilities

“Next up...” I was holding a large basket full of three types of fish that each resembled stingfish, pufferfish, and eel. Back in Japan, all these were considered delicacies.

“You said people *don’t* eat these around here?”

“They’re all poisonous, so it isn’t safe,” Nikki said.

“Can’t people just cut the poisonous bits off? I had fish like these in my hometown, and we could eat those.”

“Well... We’d only eat this one if the weather’s too poor to fish, or if we don’t catch anything else.” Nikki pointed at the eel-like creature. Apparently, these were a steady catch throughout the year, even now, and filled up most of the basket. “On top of the poison in its blood, it stinks, it’s full of bones... It’s gross. *And* it has parasites this time of the year... This one with stingers on its fins barely has enough meat on it to eat. As long as we can fish out on the lake, we get plenty of fish that actually taste good, so no one will eat any of these. Oh, and this one that blows up will kill you! *Never* eat this one!”

“I see...” I’d have loved to try and cook them, but I decided to hold off. I had parasites to consider too.

“We sort out the ones that get caught in nets, but it’s better not to fish anything we don’t eat. Dad says the fishermen don’t like fishing them out of the lake.”

“Really... My slimes are loving them.” Specifically, the poison, medicine, and the one bloody slime that had reacted to the parasites. I was going to chalk it up to them reacting to the poison and parasites, when I noticed something.

“What’s up, Slime Guy?”

One of the poison slimes was showing particular interest in the stingfish-like

catch out of the three. Upon closer inspection, I realized that it was only eating the stingers on the fish's fins!

"Stingers, huh... I'll have to think about that later. What's next?"

"Uh... We have shellfish. Some are poisonous, some aren't."

"Let's start with the poisonous ones." Both the poison and medicine slimes recognized it as food, but nothing more, unfortunately.

"And the edible ones?"

"Sorry, these are empty... They already ate everything inside."

"Oh, well. We did ask for trash. Looks like we already have a few bites."

"What?"

A few acid slimes had already nuzzled up against Nikki, still holding the bucket full of shells. He began giving them some of the shells, and the slimes happily ingested them, slowly dissolving the shells into tiny bubbles. There was a chance that the acid slimes could evolve through eating shells. One of them, in fact, had been asking for eggs every morning... Would it evolve into yet another species? Eggshell and seashells were both primarily made of calcium carbonate, but I'd need to keep a close eye on them.

"And now for the pièce de résistance... Crab."

There were live crabs as well as crab shells, but the sticky slimes showed interest in both of them. "One for the shell, and one for... Guess I'd better keep an eye on them as well."

"Next is the rest of the trash from the fishing nets." Nikki brought me the basket just as I was about to ask for the next piece. "There's waterweeds and algae in there." He seemed to be getting a hang of things.

What a great assistant he was turning out to be... As expected, the weed slimes responded to these. I had already observed some of them reacting to water plants before. At the same time, some of them were also showing interest in the algae.

"And next up is this."

“A tattered net, eh... Let’s see what happens... Oh? This is surprising.”

“What’s going on?”

“Hm... The sticky and metal slimes are coming up to it.”

I could kind of see the correlation between a net and how sticky slimes could spew string, but I wasn’t sure why the metal slimes were reacting...

Metal + net = ...a fence?

Perhaps I would have to wait for them to evolve to find out. In any case, this was something else to keep a watch on.

“Here’s the last two!” Nikki said, holding a pail in each hand. One was stuffed with sand, and the other with shattered pottery.

“Right, let’s see... The stone slimes like both, and I see a poison slime going for the sand.” The poison slime in question had been eating coal in addition to poison lately. Would it evolve into something that related to both coal and sand, or something else entirely...? I’d just have to wait and see.

With further examples of evolution, I could find commonalities and evolution conditions that were not based on their diet. I considered getting more poison slimes to look for other specimens that would eat coal... Then, I wondered if I should simply grow my slime population as much as possible.

Prior to all of this, I had good reason to aggressively multiply my stone slimes, so I decided to double down on that. Experimenting with their evolution was an important process to me. I was sure that I would reach some conclusion before they flattened the abandoned mines of Gimul...

“That’s all of it!” Nikki exclaimed.

“Oh, right. Now, let’s jot down the slimes that have a chance of evolving, and their diet. *Item Box.*”

“You got it!”

I produced a set of stationary, and wrote out the possible evolutions for each type of slime:

- Sticky slime

- Crab slime
- Crustacean slime
- Net slime
- Acid slime
 - Shellfish slime
 - Stinger slime
- Metal slime
 - Fence slime
- Bloody slime
 - Parasite slime
- Stone slime
 - Sand slime
 - Porcelain slime
- Weed slime
 - Water grass slime
 - Algae slime

“That makes thirteen evolutions in all.”

“From just seven species of slime?” Nikki asked.

“These are just *possible* evolutions, but I didn’t expect to get so many in one day. Now that I have it all laid out, I can tell a lot of the food is exclusive to this location, like the fish and crabs. I can work with sand and porcelain, and even grow some water grass and algae in my Dimension Home, but stingers and parasites would have to be caught here in the wild...”

“Why don’t you just move to our village, Slime Guy?”

“I wish I could, but alas, I have other commitments...”

Even though I had mostly delegated the management of my shops to others, there was still some paperwork that required my approval, plus I needed to regularly patrol the abandoned mines.

I could send someone here to look after the slimes and report back to me, but Nikki was too young, and no one in Sikum's Pier was a tamer... Maybe I could just build another branch in the village, and appoint Culkin or someone else to be in charge?

The more I thought about it, the better it sounded. I had just discovered numerous evolutionary possibilities in a new environment; it was highly likely that I would find more as I traveled to new locations, but I didn't have the time to travel everywhere and conduct experiments on my own.

If I could just expand the laundry business, setting up branches in various locations and appointing tamers and researchers to conduct experiments with the slimes at those locations, I could keep up with my business and research at the same time... Note to self: discuss this with Carme when I get back.

"Pretty sure your hands are tied right now, Slime Guy."

"I know, this is all in the future... Wait, was I thinking aloud?"

"And how. So, what's next?"

"I'll feed them these things while I'm here, and gather the non-perishables as much as I can before I leave. Other than that, I'll wait and see."

Slimes ate everything. If an item in their feed which could spark evolution were to run out, they'd just move onto something else. If they ended up evolving into a completely different species, that was no skin off my nose.

"It's not like they're going to starve; I'm in no hurry to make them evolve. Just gonna take it easy."

"Okay. What do you want me to do next?"

"Well... I think we'll have to call it a day."

The processing station must have closed for the day, as I could see women flooding the plaza to pick up their children. Nikki would have to go home soon. Sure enough, we soon heard a voice calling.

“Nikki, let’s go home.”

“Mom!”

“Ryoma, thank you so much for keeping him company.”

“He’s a great assistant.”

“Mom, I helped take care of the slimes today! There’s so many different species!”

“Now that sounds like a fun day.”

“Sure was! Oh, Slime Guy. How long will it take for the slimes to evolve into the species you found out today? I want to watch them evolve!”

“Unfortunately, I think that’s going to take a few more months.” I’d have loved to show Nikki some slime evolutions during my stay, of course, especially after he went to all the trouble of helping me out, but those were the breaks.

“Okay... Can I help you take care of the slimes tomorrow?”

“Of course! It’d be a big help.”

“Sweet! See you tomorrow, Slime Guy!”

Nikki walked away, happily waving at me with his free hand as his mother led him home by the other.



That evening, my recollection of the day’s events was met with joyous laughter.

“And he asked to help you out tomorrow?”

“You’re becoming his best buddy, Ryoma.”

“All thanks to what happened yesterday, no doubt.”

Kei, May, and Kai seemed sure that I had earned Nikki’s admiration. I felt like I was just rambling about my hobby, but I was happy that he was opening up to me.

“Are you two going to collect more trash tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that should be the plan.”

“Can you take our trash too? You don’t mind, do you, dear?”

Her husband simply nodded as he set down his drink.

“That would be great, thank you. I think dinner’s about ready.”

Tonight, cooking was on me. As thanks to May and her mother for gathering up all that rice and other food for me, I had made yellowtail (or boneless fish, as they called it) with radishes—the perfect repast for a cold winter night.

“Here you are, eat up!” I moved the pot from the oven to the hearth, scooping a serving into everyone’s bowl, starting with Hoy.

The family began eating the dish with curiosity.

“Mm! That’s a lot of flavor.”

“You really softened up that hard root.”

Oh, right... I almost forgot.

“Try some of this with it,” I said, offering some shaved horice.

“Now this is different from putting it in soup.”

“Not bad...” Hoy finished the drink that had been poured for him. “Quite a nice pairing, I’d say.” He was getting louder and more energetic with every sip he threw back.

“You go ahead and eat too, Ryoma. We’re going to clear this out in no time.”

“I would imagine so.”

I started with the boneless fish that I had been curious about. True to its name, the fish had come out of the boil completely boneless. I took a bite to find the texture was strangely soft, but its flavor was smooth and tasty. Then I moved on to the radish, warm and calming in its aroma. It crumbled in my mouth, melting into a flavorful flood of seafood broth. I took another piece of the fish, this time with some horice; the pinch of spice really elevated the flavor.

At this point, I decided to crack open something special.

“Excuse me a moment... *Item Box!*”

“Is that a drink?”

“Yes. A gift from a dragonewt friend of mine.” It was a bottle of high-end *daiginjo* sake that I had been gifted by Asagi a while back. I’d held onto it, since it felt like a serious luxury, but if there was ever a time to open it, right now seemed to be the perfect opportunity.

I produced cups with the bottle, and took a sip. The clear, vivid taste flowed through me. This, combined with the incredibly flavorful radish, turned out to be...

“Delicious!” I exclaimed. “Though on a day like today, I bet it’d be even better served hot.”

I started a boiling pot of water on a magical stovetop. “Would you care to indulge with me?” I asked the table.

“Hey, I like the way ya think. Don’t mind if I do.”

“Take it easy, Kai.”

“For a kid, ya really seem to know your way ’round your liquor.”

“I was raised by a dwarf. And I’m blessed by the god of wine.”

“Blessed by the god of wine? Dang! Now it all makes sense... Right, why don’t you try this one until yours is ready? It’s nothing fancy, but it’s brewed locally.”

“Gladly.”

I took a small cup, one that resembled a traditional sake vessel, that was filled with a milky white liquid. It made me think of *doburoku*, one of the cloudy variants of sake. Upon tossing it back, I could taste the granulated ingredient mixed with a strong sweetness and the slightest hint of tartness; it was kind of like *amazake*. At the same time, there was a pinch of familiar bitterness.

“Is this made from grainspear grass?”

“It sure is. You know your stuff.”

“Wow... I’m a bit surprised you can make a drink from that.” It hadn’t come up in my appraisal, and I hadn’t thought of it after eating it all this time.

“You can’t just use raw grainspear. You need the grass that turns it into a spirit.”

“There’s such a thing, Kei?”

“Yeah. Grows practically everywhere.”



As he spoke, Kai headed to the door and threw it open, swooping down to grab a fistful of grass from the ground. He rushed back to the table. “Brr, it’s vicious out there! Here, this is it.”

It really *did* grow everywhere. It just looked like a patch of weed growing by the sidewalk... It wasn’t on my radar of knowledge of herbs and poisonous grass, anyway.

“It’s pretty much just a weed to us as well. It just so happens that it can make a good drink.”

“I wonder who came up with that idea...”

Could I grow this plant if I gave it to the weed slimes? Another experiment to keep in mind for my stay. If I could make alcohol from grainspear grass, it would actually be a lot of help to me. I would save money on feeding the drunk slimes, and I wouldn’t have to plan trips into town to procure the alcohol they need!

“Can anyone teach me how to make this?” I asked.

“You want to learn? I can show you tomorrow, if you like.”

“I didn’t know you could make that stuff, mom.”

“Come now, May. A woman’s got to know how to brew a good hooch.”

Accordingly, it was common practice for each household to brew their own “hooch,” and every woman learned how to do so before marriage. However, it took time and technique to make the drink right. As the village became wealthier, villagers began purchasing the drink from households that made it well.

“I haven’t made any in a while... This could be a good opportunity to pass down our secret family recipe.”

“You never told me we had a secret family recipe, mom.”

“If it’s any better than this one, we could have become the local ale house.”

“Ha! That ain’t sayin’ much, is it now!” Hoy roared, and the room filled with laughter again.

Amidst all the merriment, my sake was fully heated.

“Let’s keep the good vibes going! Here you are, Kai.”

“Thanks... Phew! Kei, this stuff is delicious. Have some.”

“Really? Then... Do you mind if I take a sip?”

“Go right ahead.”

We enjoyed a night of merry conversation, delicious boneless fish, radishes, and drinks. By the end of it all, our hearts and bodies were as warm as the air outside was cold. Satisfied that I was able to gather new feed for the slimes, I crawled into bed and drifted off to sleep in no time at all.

Chapter 6 Episode 14: An Unexpected Evolution

“Brr...!”

The next morning, I was awakened by the biting air seeping into my bed. That morning was particularly cold, as if to signify winter had truly arrived.

With great force of will, I threw off my bedding and began dressing for the day... But the clothes that I had laid out the previous night were icy cold!

“So much for normal layers today...”

I decided to take a different outfit out of the Item Box—a faux down jacket, stuffed with the feathers of a fluff slime and made waterproof by sticky slimes. I couldn’t recreate a zipper, so it was a button-down, but I had used rubber from the latex slimes to cinch the wrists in order to keep the cold air out.

Satisfied with the comfort and warmth of my creation, I resolved to work hard yet again today.



The next week flew by. I spent each morning hunting mad salamanders, each afternoon looking after and researching slimes, and each evening cooking dinner and preparing for the next morning. Still, there were a lot of little things that happened.

To review...

On the first day, while I was preparing for the hunt, as I had done the previous day, I noticed something was off about the limour birds when I let them out of the Dimension Home. Upon inquiring, they communicated to me that they would work if they had to, but it was bitterly cold. Since wild limour birds were migratory, they would have flown to a more comfortable climate during the winter. I decided to have the limour birds stay in the Dimension Home, and to keep them out of the hunt going forward. Of course, I still set aside time for them to fly around in order to keep their stress levels down, but they didn’t stay out longer than half an hour. Fortunately, the Dimension Home was maintained

at a comfortable temperature. I would prepare them to weather the winter, with their input, once we'd returned to Gimul.

I had also wondered if the clever chickens wanted to come out once in a while, but Kohaku assured me that there was no need. That was evidently a very nice way of describing the power dynamic among the clever chickens. I made a mental note to get the poor, overworked leader of the chickens something tasty.

That night, I began learning how to make white ale from grainspear grass; Kai and Kei's mother showed me the prep work. While we worked on that, she told me how the ladies of the village took turns cooking lunch at the processing station, and that her turn was coming up in two days. She went on to spill the tea on how arduous it was to decide on which dishes to make, how there were men who complained that there wasn't enough variety despite the ladies trying to balance budget, nutrition, and taste, and so on and so on.

While I never married in my previous life, there was the possibility that I would take a wife in this world... *Note to self: if I ever get married, do not under any circumstances complain about my wife's cooking.*

The second day of the week was a day off from salamander hunting, since we got one day to rest for every three days of hunting. Nevertheless, I woke up around the same time in the morning, so I decided to jog along the shore for a light workout. I summoned the iron and metal slimes that were having trouble moving on the sand, and had them train with me. I ended up with three slimes that could now move noticeably faster than the rest.

I appraised these slimes, and found that they had learned a skill called Off-roading. They were still level 1, but the existence of this new skill alone gave me hope that, with training, the slimes could traverse the sandy beach like any other terrain.

While I was retelling this discovery to Nikki during our afternoon trash collecting, the village leader gave us an old seine from the village's shared storage shed. Fishing nets were one of the ingredients that could enable new slime evolutions, so I couldn't have enough of them. I gave the village leader my sincerest thanks. He seemed a bit taken aback before asking if I wouldn't mind

gathering extra firewood for the village, if I insisted on showing gratitude. Naturally, I accepted.

“Are you sure about this, Slime Guy?” Nikki asked after we left.

“What? It’s the least I could do, after he gave me such a big seine.”

“We have a festival every year at the end of the fishing season, where we burn all of the nets we can’t fix anymore on the bonfire. He tricked you into doing extra work for the village in exchange for garbage.”

“Well, that’s one way to think about it... But that net *is* valuable to me, and I assumed we’d be going into the forest to gather firewood anyway. If I’m lucky, I’ll find local slimes there... Maybe even a mud slime. I was planning to go out there at least once during my stay, so it all works out.”

“With an attitude like that, people are gonna walk all over you if you’re not careful...”

Even while Nikki quipped at me, he still promised to help me look for slimes, and even gathered firewood with me. What a good kid.

On the third day, there were fewer hands on deck for the salamander hunt in the morning. A majority of the adventurers had headed over to defend other villages. While each fighter had to handle more salamanders than before, we had no trouble fending off the salamanders, as everyone grew accustomed to the slimes’ involvement in the hunt.

That day, I started to realize that the process of gathering salamander carcasses could be useful in training my space magic as well as my physical stamina.

After lunch, I waited for Nikki to be dismissed from the processing station before venturing out to the woods. Upon discussion, we decided to gather all the firewood we needed first to concentrate on our search effort for new slimes.

When I easily lifted the first tree we cut down onto my shoulder, Nikki gave me a look of astonished respect. Apparently, he didn’t expect me to have that much physical strength, since I looked the same age as him, and I’d mostly been utilizing my slimes during the salamander hunts. After that, I couldn’t help but

try to show off a little bit as we gathered more lumber.

The village leader was very happy with our contribution, and sent us home with a bucket full of a creature that looked like a cross between a squid and a crab. Nikki informed me that it was a fairly rare delicacy. We cooked and stuffed it with rice that night, and it tasted better than the rice-stuffed squid I remembered from Japan.

On the fourth day, I devised a couple of new space magic spells that would help me collect carcasses. One was Drop Off, a spell that transported things from near me to a faraway destination, inspired by the spell Pick Up with the opposite effect which the scholar/adventurer Leipin was using. The other was Wormhole, which connected two locations, along the same vein as Item Box or Dimension Home.

Now that I didn't have to go back and forth with the salamander carcasses, I was going to save a lot of stamina and magical energy. Furthermore, I was testing setting the Drop Off destination as the Item Box in order to store anything I wanted to in one easy step.

I waited for Nikki after my lunch, this time as the cleaner slimes and I helped wash dishes at the processing station. Nikki had appeared with his mother and several ladies of the village earlier, all wanting us to take their trash, so I happily obliged. Some of them even discretely asked me to take care of built-up sewage; I assumed Nikki had already told them about the scavenger slimes' diet. For these requests, I stationed a few scavenger slimes in their toilets, which I would collect on my way home. After taking their trash, we headed to the forest and ended up catching three new slimes.

On the fifth day, I was cornered by a much larger group of ladies than the previous day. In exchange for cleaning out their toilets, they would give me their trash and food scraps, which added up to a lot of slime feed!

On the sixth day, I had another day off from salamander hunting. When I returned from my morning jog, the portion of the plaza that I had borrowed already hosted a tall pile of trash. I asked the adults who were in the process of dumping their trash onto the pile, and was told that most people did major house-cleanings at the end of the year anyway, and I was making their lives

easier by taking the trash off of their hands. One of them jokingly told me, “If you were just going to cherry-pick what you wanted and litter the rest into the woods or lake, I would have given you hell, but look at you go!” Despite the joking tone, everyone there gave me a piercing look. Still, I was happy to take care of all of the trash, and resolved to continue doing so.

In addition to the massive mound of slime feed, the village leader had delivered to me twenty slimes stored in pots. He explained that he felt bad that my only reward (other than my pay from the guild for hunting salamanders) was trash and scraps after helping out the village through salamander hunting, garbage disposal, and firewood gathering.

I was grateful for those trash and scraps, of course, but I recognized that the village leader may not have wanted to feel like he owed me anything, no matter how small. He insisted, so I gladly took the slimes. He had chosen slimes to thank me with, thanks to Nikki’s proud suggestion. Great kid. Once I thoroughly expressed my gratitude, the village leader left in relief.

On the seventh day, I felt like I was beginning to get the hang of using space magic during the hunt. I wasn’t jotting down any precise data, but I figured my success rate for transporting multiple objects at once was improving. After lunch, I was no longer an adventurer but a waste manager. We toured the houses of the elderly, who couldn’t have carried heavy trash to the plaza, running and fully utilizing my space magic spells in the process. This side hustle was starting to become useful training too.

That day, I had gained four new slimes I caught in the wild, in addition to eight slimes I was given as payment for my services.

Now, the fruits of my week’s labor (as well as the goodwill of the villagers) stood before me: two slimes that had already evolved into brand new species! One of them was a metal slime that had kept eating fishing nets. Its appearance remained mostly the same as it was when it was a metal slime, except that it had shrunk a little. Now I was eager to learn what its name and abilities were.

“Monster Appraisal.”

Wire Slime

Skills: Physical Hardening 3, Stretch 3, Physical Attack Resistance 2, Rapid Movement 3, Consume 3, Absorb 3, Split 2

“Wire, huh... Maybe it wanted the string that the nets were made of? Its skills are mostly unchanged from when it was a metal. The only new skill is Stretch... Already seemed like it was stretchy enough to me, though.”

I asked it to use the skill in question, and the wire slime began stretching a part of its anatomy like a tentacle... Then it kept going, stretching its appendage like it was weaving a string!

“One meter... Two meters... Can you keep going?”

It looked like it could stretch for a long, long distance. On top of that, it was waving its stringy limb every which way, showing that it could move its wire more freely than its bulkier tentacle.

I let it stretch out and out for a while, until it seemed like it was shrinking in size. Could it only weave a “wire” that maintained its mass? I would test its abilities further down the road, but I could already think of various uses for its ability.

“Now, let’s see about this one... Well, no surprises here. Never saw one this big before, though.”

The other evolved slime was the acid slime that had been eating eggs and seashells. I had been expecting calcium carbonate, but not this. Its milky white body let off a particular glimmer.

Pearl Slime

Skills: Protective Mucus Secretion 3, Cover Up 3, Crystallize 3, Consume 3, Absorb 3, Split 2

“It seriously went pearl on me...”

But how did I get pearl from acid? I had been feeding it shells, but they weren’t pearl shells... Then I remembered that there were various shells that

can form a pearl layer in them. Plus the main component of a pearl was calcium carbonate, so it wasn't too far-fetched. I had fed an acid slime seashells and eggs... Vinegar and eggs combined made mayonnaise, and I remember seeing something on TV about making pearls out of mayonnaise back in the day...

I was curious about the logic behind this evolution, of course, but there was another glaring problem. Pearl farming had not been established during medieval times, and with a catch rate of a handful of pearls for every ten thousand shells, the jewel was extremely valuable during that period of history... Or so I had read in a light novel once. I didn't have a precise grasp of how valuable pearls were in this world, but I'd gleaned from my medicinal knowledge that they were a rare and expensive commodity; clearly, people knew they were a thing.

The pearl slime itself looked like a giant pearl, which would fetch it a great price on its own... But judging from the Protective Mucus Secretion, Cover Up, and Crystallize skills, there was a chance I could farm pearls from it. And if I *could* farm pearls... The pearl slime would be valuable enough for some shady characters to want to get their hands on them. I certainly wouldn't want to divulge its existence to everyone within earshot...

"How do I break this to Nikki..."

He was looking forward to feeding the slimes every day, so he knew full well that we had been feeding the acid slime egg and seashells... What was I going to do?

"Ryoma? Are you still in bed?" Kai called, making me nearly jump in surprise.

"No, I'm up."

"All right. Breakfast should be ready soon."

"Thank you, I'll be right down!"

This morning really whisked by. I decided to eat breakfast before I did any more thinking...

Chapter 6 Episode 15: Summons

“Phew...” The day’s hunt and subsequent break for lunch also whisked by very quickly, and I found myself waiting for Nikki once again.

“Slime Guy! I just got out!” It looked like even Nikki finished his work early.

“Yeah...”

“Is something wrong?”

“No... I do have a bit of news for you, though.” I went on to tell him about the wire slime, without concealing anything.

“What?! It evolved already?!”

“It did. All thanks to you and the villagers providing it with all that food, of course.”

“I wanna see it! Can I see it? Huh, huh?!”

“Of course. I was thinking of testing what the slime could do out in the forest after gathering today’s trash...”

“Got it! Let’s get started!”

We left the dining hall together, and set off to work. Nikki was so enthusiastic to see the wire slime that we finished our trash collection in no time.

We traveled to the woods where we had gathered firewood before, and I summoned the wire slime.

“Huh... It looks the same,” Nikki observed.

“That’s right. It shrunk just a tiny bit, enough that you’d hardly notice it. But now...” I had the slime stretch out an appendage, and it obliged, stretching thin as a wire.

“Interesting... We fed it nets, so can it use that like a net? Can it change how thick or thin it is? How long can it stretch now?”

“Let’s find out.”

I asked the wire slime directly, and it told me that it could adjust the thickness of its wiry appendage, but could stretch it longer the thinner it became. I had already guessed that its volume played a factor in how far the slime could reach. I had it stretch itself in a cylindrical shape, maintaining the same circumference, and it maxed out at forty meters long. I calculated its volume as the cylinder, and its volume in its usual, spherical form; it was basically a match.

That being said, it seemed that its core wasn't as malleable as the rest of its body, as it had been spherical and bare while it stretched itself as far as possible, save for a thin membrane. The fact that its weak point would be obviously identifiable was an issue I had to keep in mind.

I continued to test if it could form itself to a net-like shape; the slime could stretch any part of itself into wire, and could produce multiple strands at once. It could braid those appendages into rope too. It could still change its form like it used to when it was a metal slime, but it was limited to its wire-form: making itself into barbed or serrated wire.

"That about does it, I think. Now... Nikki, would you like to watch a slime evolve?"

"Sure would! You don't mind, right?"

"I actually have one type of slime that I can induce to evolve right now." I produced the slimes that we had caught or were given the other day. "Slimes react to magical energy just like they do to food. By giving it a lot of magical energy of a particular element at once, it will evolve into a slime that uses magic of that element."

"You did tell me *you* evolved the magic slimes. Is that how you did it?"

"Call it serendipity. I think their elemental preference depends on their habitat. I almost exclusively found slimes that preferred the earth and dark elements at my home base, and I've heard of fire slimes being spotted in volcanic areas. Which brings me to these guys... I tested which element the slimes we caught around here preferred, and most of them like water magic."

"So they'll turn into slimes that can *use* water magic?"

"That's right. I can provide them with magical energy now, so we should be

able to evolve them. I don't have a water slime yet, so let's give it a try."

I shot out water magic from my hand, and placed the first slime to approach me between Nikki and me. Making sure that Nikki was paying close attention, I gently poured water magic into the slime.

"It's trying to cling to your hand," Nikki noted.

The slime was stretching towards my hand, trying to absorb the magic I was giving it. Soon enough, the slime seemed to have taken enough magical energy. It reverted to its natural, gelatinous form, and vibrated a few times as if to find the right shape before becoming still again. It started to emit a trace amount of magical energy.

"It stopped moving..." Nikki said. It sounded like he couldn't sense the magical energy coming from the slime, so I told him as much. "Really... Maybe because I can't use magic, it just looks like it's sitting there... What does magical energy look like, Slime Guy?"

"Well... It's a bit hard to describe... Maybe like a series of waves. There are small waves coming out of the slime, which return to it like a flowing river... It's also like the slime is breathing in the same air it's breathing out. It's not often I get to watch a slime evolve, but other, non-magic-wielding slimes do this circulation of magical energy too. It could be a necessary process to slime evolution."

"Huh... I see."

The color of the slime had begun to change, starting with the slightest hue of blue appearing on its translucent body. It slowly and steadily shifted into sky blue, until the circulation of magical energy stopped.

I appraised the slime.

Water Slime

Skills: Water Magic 2, Water Resistance 8, Water Magic Absorption 1, Jump 1, Consume 3, Absorb 3, Split 1

“Yeah, it’s definitely evolved,” I noted.

I asked the slime to produce water by magic, and it shot out a stream of water with more force than I had expected; it was almost like a fountain.

“It actually used magic!” Nikki shouted. “What else can it do?”

I had the slime use attack spells like Water Ball, and Nikki applauded in excitement.

After a showcase of the water slime’s spells, he ran all through the woods, catching more slimes for me: fifteen slimes in all.



“What’s going on?”

“Seems like there’s info going around.”

Upon returning to the village, Nikki and I noticed that many adults were in discussion with each other out on the streets. Most households should have been preparing dinner at this time of day, but here we were.

“Let’s ask about it,” Nikki said. “Hello!”

“Oh, hello, Nikki, Ryoma. Were you out in the forest again?”

“Yeah, we just got back,” Nikki answered. “What happened?”

“We just received a messenger from the lord. He’s coming to our village tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?! Why so soon?”

“Well...” The lady turned to me. “He wants to see Ryoma.”

“What?! Me?”

“That’s what I heard. I don’t know the whole story... And there should have been a message delivered to Hoy’s place too. But why don’t you see the village leader? He was the one the knight’s messenger went to, so he should be able to fill you in.”

“Thanks, I’ll be sure to stop by.”

I couldn’t think of any reason for me to receive a summons from the lord of

the land. I had heard a little bit about him, but there was no reason for him to know about me. It looked like my best bet for answers was the village elder, so I decided to knock on his door before going home and before it got dark. I thanked the woman whom we spoke to, and parted with Nikki along the way.

When I arrived at his residence, I bumped into the village elder, who seemed to have just returned from somewhere.

“Oh, Ryoma. Good timing. I was just at Hoy’s place.”

“About the lord coming to the village tomorrow... I heard a little bit about it, namely that he wants to see me... Do you know why?”

“Surely it’s because of your contribution to the hunt. He’s coming to give us a bit of encouragement, and he wants to see Kai and Kei as well.”

“Thank goodness... I didn’t know why he wanted to see me. For a moment there, I thought I was in trouble or something.”

The village leader laughed. “No need to be too concerned. Our lord is a very kind man. Just act natural, and you’ll get through it just fine.”

“Thanks. Speaking of, I actually have a letter I was given in case I gain an audience with your lord.” The thought just occurred to me; Reinhart, the current duke, had given it to me before I returned to Gimul, in case something happened during my time here. Since I had no plans to see the lord, I didn’t think I’d need it... Good thing I just kept it in the Item Box.

“Hm... Then I shall take it from you just before your meeting.”

“Thank you. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Indeed. Keep up the great work with the hunt, please. And stay warm.”

On my way home, the shrine at the edge of the plaza caught my attention. It held a rock that I took to be a divine statue, greatly worn out from what I assumed was decades of wind and rain.

“Maybe I’ll stop by for a prayer...” Come to think of it, this would be just the second noble I would end up meeting. All of the villagers had painted the lord as a kind man, but he would almost certainly be traveling with some kind of security detail... Standing before the shrine, I clapped my hands together and

prayed that all would go well.

Just then, a brilliant white light flooded my eyes. Apparently, I didn't have to be in a church to be summoned.



I suddenly felt a sense of weightlessness. I opened my eyes, surprised by this new method of summoning me, to find a wide expanse before me...

Water!

The instant the realization hit me, I fell straight into the body of water. While I couldn't tell how far I'd fallen, I didn't feel much of an impact. But now, the water seemed to cling to me and weighed me down. The surface was fading into the distance...

"Chill out. You can breathe in this stuff. Go ahead, give it a try," a voice called out, just as I was about to try and crawl towards the air above.

Sure enough, even though it still felt like I was sinking through water, I could breathe just fine. Calming myself, I turned upward towards the voice. There floated a teenager's silhouette against the bright refraction behind them. The silhouette slid through the water to approach me, where I could finally see them.

"Hello there."

"Hello. I'm Ryoma Takebayashi... Excuse me for venturing a guess, but are you Serelipta, the god of fishing and ports?"

"Oh? Have we met somewhere before? Sharp boy. I would have thought all the statues of me were butch."

My guess had apparently hit the mark. Indeed, most myths depicted Serelipta as a butch, stereotypically manly man of the sea. But the god currently addressing me had overgrown hair hiding the right half of his face, and a rather androgynous voice to boot. Even the visible half of his face was as pale as freshly fallen snow, the bags under his eyes detracting further from the mental image of a healthy fisherman.

Serelipta's flowy layers of fabric concealed most of his stature, but his wrist

poking from the fabric was so thin and fragile that it looked breakable. The god was far from a muscular man, and more like a little girl... I didn't want to be rude, but I couldn't help but get agoraphobic vibes from him.

"I only guessed who you were because I prayed at a shrine in a fishing village... Plus the whole, you know, falling into the water and stuff."

"True." He smirked. "I am *the* god associated with water, after all." He continued floating in the water, the edges of his garb fluttering like tail fins. "You don't have to struggle so much," he said, laughing. "Just relax, and let yourself float on the water. Much easier that way."

I did as he instructed, and found myself floating quite comfortably on the surface.

"There you go," Serelipta said. "And no need for any formalities, by the way... Gain and the others call you here often, don't they?"

"I enjoy the privilege every once in a while."

"I usually don't really talk to humans... But I've very much wanted to meet you."

"Meet me? I'm honored, but why...? Do I amuse you as much as the other gods?"

"Nope. You're a complete bore to watch."

"Uh, really..."

"I mean, come on. You're just living an average life in a fishing village. No monsters attacking you or anything. I could just watch any one of those villagers doing the same crap as you any day... It's dull, you get me? There's hardly any drama or conflict. Like, I get it, fighting and adventuring isn't *all* life has to offer, but am I really supposed to watch you live out your perfectly normal life without getting bored out of my head?"

"Well..."

"I'm not saying you're stuck in a rut of doing the same thing constantly or anything, but it's still pretty monotonous, don't you think? Can't you put a little more action in your life every now and then? A little more pizzazz?"

“I haven’t been living with the entertainment value of my actions in mind...”

“So I noticed. For a start...”

He continued to lazily, but steadily, criticize me in decidedly cutting terms; all I could do was just listen quietly. Again, I hadn’t really thought about stuff like that during my day-to-day routine, but somehow, this god I’d never met before was giving me serious “editor lecturing an author about every single mistake they make” vibes...

Chapter 6 Episode 16: God of Fishing and Ports, Part 1

“So, have I made myself clear?”

“Crystal. Though I can’t make any promises.”

“Good enough. I know you have your moral woes... Wait, what were we talking about?”

“Um... I was asking why you wanted to see me, Serelipta.”

“Oh, right! You asked if it was because you were *entertaining*, and I was like, you’re such a bore...”

“Yes.”

“Right, right. Anyway, I summoned you because you *intrigued* me. Not necessarily entertained.”

I was starting to get it. This god kept mentioning the entertainment value (or lack thereof) of my life, but he didn’t mean any insult by it. He just seemed to have no filter. “What about me intrigued you, Serelipta?”

“How do I put this... Gain told me about a new kid in the world, but I caught a glimpse of you when you came into the village you’re in and thought that we might be alike, you and I.”

“What exactly do you mean, Serelipta?”

“Just call me Serel. It’s not like we have *company*.”

“All right, Serel. What do you mean?”

“Let’s see...” He sat in thought for ten seconds. “How do *you* think we’re alike?”

He was turning out to be a tiresome conversation partner... How were we similar? I dug for a similarity between us that I could have caught in the short time we’d been acquainted.

“We both like to stay indoors?”

“You got that from my looks, didn’t you? Well, it’s not exactly wrong.”

“We’re both pretty insensitive and don’t know when to shut up?”

“I won’t deny that... But you’re not getting any warmer.”

“We’re both antisocial?”

“You’re quite a little smartass for a mortal, you know that? I mean, none of those are wrong per se, but I’m talking about something *deep down*...”

Deep down?

“Humans always have some part of themselves they don’t understand... Maybe this is yours? Even through conversations, some things float to the surface and others don’t... Our compass, or like, the depths of ourselves? Hmm... It’s so hard to put it into words... I’ve never spoken to a human this much before...”

I guessed that he was trying to explain the concept of the unconscious.

“The foundation of thoughts and emotions, basically. It’s the same for humans and gods.”

“I understand the gist of it. You’re saying that our foundations are similar?”

“Right. Similar, but not identical, mind you... My principle, to put it in pithy terms, is ‘survival of the fittest.’ You can relate to that, can’t you?”

“Do you think so?”

“Not clicking yet? Okay, real talk.” Serelipta had been floating before me, posing as if he was leaning back on a chair. Now, he shifted to look like he was lying on the ground, resting his chin in his hands...while still floating in the water, of course.

He kept talking like he was going through talking points in a presentation; it wasn’t exactly a two-way conversation.

“Oh, am I talking too much?” Serelipta asked.

“No, I just... You read my mind. I’m just a bit taken aback by your enthusiasm.”

“Good. I told you already that I rarely talk to humans, let alone other gods.”

He seemed talkative, but unaware of social cues. Either that, or he just couldn't help but blurt out every thought that crossed his mind. In any case, he seemed like the type who wasn't good at communication, despite how talkative he was. That wasn't a rare trait, though (at least when it came to humans).

“Thanks for understanding,” he said. “Let's get back on track. You kept your sparkly new pearl slime a secret from that boy who's been helping you. Why?”

With a coy crook of the neck like that, he could be easily mistaken for a teenage girl.

With a bit of uneasiness, I answered truthfully. “I didn't know its exact value, but I guessed it was valuable. Nikki's still a kid, so I figured it would be safer if he didn't know about it. No way for that information to get out.”

“I think you guessed right. Pearls are more valuable than you think in this world. Especially in Rifall, where they haven't discovered how to harvest them. If you were to start selling them, plenty of people would try to suss out where the jewels were coming from, and many of them would try to take over such a profitable operation. Of course, you can't expect all of them to limit themselves to legal, nonviolent options in pursuit of that end... You do have trustworthy merchants in your social circle, and the powerful Duke in your corner. You'd be able to fend off most attackers by yourself, anyway. Can't say the same for this Nikki kid, though. The villagers might be able to protect him from a petty thief or two, but he wouldn't stand a chance against underground guilds or morally questionable nobles.”

Serel rattled off a bunch of hypothetical tragic outcomes, all the while maintaining his smile. “You've got good foresight, Ryoma.”

“I suppose... Wouldn't anyone be wary when a lot of money is involved? In my previous life, for example, I've heard that banks would warn lottery winners about who they shared that information with.”

Serelipta suddenly burst out laughing. Did I say something weird?

“Sorry, sorry... Can't you tell? Or are you just playing dumb?”

“Uh, please explain?”

“Oh, right. Let’s see... You say ‘anyone,’ but you’d be surprised how many people wouldn’t do what you did. For example, in most human societies, people are expected to greet each other, respect their elders, stuff like that. But aren’t there a good number of people who get in trouble for not doing those things?”

“That’s true... I’ve been on both the receiving and giving end of reminders to do those things.”

“Right. Important as they may be, humans can be surprisingly negligent when it comes to doing what ‘you’re supposed to do.’ Even with your example of the lottery winners, the only reason the banks started warning winners was because too many of them didn’t do what they were supposed to and keep their mouths shut, right? Of course, there still must be people who don’t heed those warnings regardless.”

That all made sense, but something was still bugging me. Weren’t we talking about how a part of my “compass” was “survival of the fittest?”

“This is still relevant,” Serel continued. “It’s all about keeping your guard up. The prospect of earning a fortune made you naturally wary of those who may come to take it from you. Keeping your guard up is crucial for survival. No living creature would live very long if they didn’t; they’d be easy prey. Take the two former assassins you’ve hired. You noticed that they were concealing weapons before you even hired them, right? Putting aside why they were carrying them, it’d be an important skill for an assassin to be able to conceal his arms. I mean, you’d be a pretty piss-poor assassin if everybody in the general vicinity could spot your weapon without squinting. The two guys you hired aren’t complete idiots, are they? Of course not. That’s how much you, maybe subconsciously, keep your guard up day-to-day. Survival of the fittest is the only rule in the wild. Humans may consider themselves separate from other animals, but they’re all the same to me. I mean, they’re all walking the same planet. Only real difference is in how they live. For example...”

His mutterings seemed to echo loudly in my ears.

“You make all sorts of things and know all sorts of weird things. Why is that?”

The question seemed out of place, almost unrelated. Still, I definitely felt the increase in my heart rate from it. “Well, maybe it’s because I’ve done all sorts of

work... I've always done my research on anything I was curious about. In my past life, we had something very convenient called the internet, so that made it easy."

"You've had quite the *non-linear* career."

"Not sure I'd word it like that, but I guess it's accurate."

"So you've quit, or were fired from, all of those jobs, right?"

"Uh, yes?"

What was going on? It was a straightforward question, but some indescribable feeling—nervousness, or perhaps anxiety—curdled inside of me.

"You've gone through quite a few different jobs. I won't get into the specifics of each one, but just answer me this: were you always happy to leave your job?"

"Well..." My head was boiling with a strange sort of emotion.

"Of course you weren't. From what I've heard, humans need a good reason to quit their job."

It was definitely true that I hadn't always been happy to leave a job.

"You've experienced your fair share of that," Serel added.

Indeed, he had a number of examples to name. Feeling almost persecuted after relationships with my coworkers worsened. Or being accused of something I had never done. Or being berated and fired without even being told a reason. Or because it was more convenient for my boss to fire me than keep me around. Or because the company had gone under. Or...

With Serel's every word, scenes from the past flickered before me. I felt sick, like I was being thrown into a riptide.

"I'm sorry," Serel said. "Guess I triggered some unpleasant memories." While I was concentrating on trying to settle my churning stomach, Serelipta had floated near me, and embraced me. He continued whispering, as if to console a child. "But you know, all that stuff's a part of you. Even though you're physically strong, you're the runt of society, and your experiences have left scars on your soul. You can't expect that all to go away just because you've been living in the

woods for... How long has it been again? Oh, right, three years going on four. Living without a care in the world for a few years won't reset your conscience."

But now, his voice seemed to calm me with every breath.

"How long do you think it takes to heal a traumatized human's heart?" Serel asked. "It depends on the individual and the severity of their trauma, of course, but many humans deal with that kind of trauma all of their life. It's a bit inconsiderate to think that three years' rest was plenty of time, or that you're not good enough for still hurting... Even if you're the only one telling yourself that. You should take care of yourself more. You thought you forgot all about the woes of your past life after a fun four years in this world, right? I can understand why you'd want to convince yourself of that. I'm sure your life has been easier here than it was before. But it just means you're in remission. One little poke, and your traumas can come flooding back just like that. It looks like you've already been reminded of your previous life from time to time, anyway."

I felt all that just from remembering my previous life? Something wasn't right... But I was feeling so comfortable now...

"You know it deep down too," said Serel. "Remember? You told Gain your wish, didn't you? That you wanted to live away from other people, to live freely in nature. That was your desire, right?"

"Well..."

That was completely true. There was no arguing that.

"There you have it. You should have stayed in that forest. That way, you would've truly been free... Gain threw you into a half-assed environment, so you were tossed back into human society before your heart could heal."

"Now wait a minute!"

"Didn't mean anything by it. No offense to the duke or the others. They took you in—a child they had no relation or obligation to—and looked after you. As far as humans go, they're as good as they come. I know that. But in the end, you still left them."

I started to feel sick again, even worse than earlier. I wanted to say something in their defense, but the words wouldn't come out. This no longer qualified as a

conversation, but still he kept talking.

“Plus, you don’t have any human allies. You’re friendly with the people you meet wherever you go, but the only ones you keep around for all of your adventures are your familiars. With your powers, there must be plenty of humans eager to form a party with you, no matter your appearance. You could have easily talked to any of the adventurers you know. As soon as you set up shop in a town, you never stick around because you scurry off to do more training... It’s definitely an unconscious thing, so let me enlighten you a little. You desperately crave human companionship, but at the same time, it terrifies you.”

Chapter 6 Episode 17: God of Fishing and Ports, Part 2

It terrifies me? What does that mean? I can't make heads or tails of this...

“You’ve been scarred by every injustice wrought against you. You do dream of living peacefully with other people, in a village, for example; it definitely makes you feel happy. But surely you know that it’s easier said than done. Reality won’t coddle you like that. You know how frail your happiness is—ready to crumble at the slightest shove. You know that humans are greedy, that they fear those who are different and try to hammer down the nails that stick out. You long for a pastoral, idyllic life, and yet you still can’t just let your guard down for a second. You may not be aware of it, but you are painfully conscious of reality, much more so than ordinary humans. In a sense, it’s practically abnormal. You’re like a cat amongst the pigeons... Guess you could say that’s the duality of man.”

“Then what am I supposed to do about it?” I blurted out.

Serel’s eyes widened, and then he floated away from me with a cackle. “Beats me. But if I were you, I’d consider being a little freer.”

Freer?

“That’s right. Be true to your feelings, your desires. You want to be a part of a group so badly that you hold yourself back, especially in combat. You always like to make your familiars the centerpiece of the situation, but you do that partly in order to hide your full potential. And you know why, don’t you? To be frank, you’ve been extremely talented in combat since your previous life. If you can unlock your full potential, you’d be as good as an A-rank adventurer. Start racking up accomplishments, and you could go for S-rank in due time. You’re crazy powerful, considering your age. Then, there’s the talent in magic the other gods bestowed upon you. It may be underwhelming now, but you’d start to learn more powerful spells with practice, and, combined with your *Earthly* knowledge, you could develop more complex magic. With your familiars

backing you up, you'd be able to overcome anything. Exceptional individuals are expected to maintain an immaculate display of morals, likable attitude, and free labor. Show any sign to the contrary, and you'll be marked Public Enemy Number One before you realize it. Praise will quickly make way for criticism and insults."

The prospects for my future aside, I understood what he was trying to say.

"But really, I don't think that stuff matters to you at all."

"Why not...?"

Serel snickered. "Didn't I explain already? Humans are a part of nature, where survival of the fittest is law. Humans grew massive influence in the world with their reproductive abilities and cleverness. Once they grew in numbers enough, they started creating their own values and rules to protect their group from outside threats. People who go against those rules have no place in human society... But that's it. If you were to, say, live all alone in a forest for three years, those rules wouldn't apply to you. With as many monsters about, there are plenty of dangerous locations for humans outside of their habitat. That's why there's plenty of undeveloped land and neutral territory unoccupied by any country. Why don't you find a place you'd want to live, where you could make your own rules and live however you pleased? You may find yourself attacked by wild monsters and human forces around you, but again, survival of the fittest. You could fight or flee, whichever suits you best. What's more, I think you could totally live free *in* human society. Killing anyone you don't like, or who gets in your way, for example. You'd be prosecuted for those 'crimes,' but all it means at the end of the day is that you had the strength to do the deed, and they didn't have the strength to protect themselves," Serelipta casually declared.

It seemed like he truly believed in everything he said. The distinctively gentle demeanor he had first displayed had faded away.

"Are you showing your true colors?" I asked.

"Maybe? I wasn't putting on an act or anything, though. I start to ramble when I get excited... You snapped out of it, didn't you? When?"

"I would have believed some negative emotions when we were talking about

my past, but not those PTSD-like symptoms. And I felt all hazy until...you started encouraging me to be more free. As soon as I guessed that it was some sort of attack on my mind, the fog cleared.”

“I thought it might have been then. For the record, it wasn’t an attack but an influence to magnify your emotions. Then, I used my powers to try and tranquilize you. I turned it up quite a bit because I heard you had crazy resistance. Imagine my shock when you responded to me like nothing happened. Actually, you sound like you’ve resisted it completely... Nullified it, perhaps? It wasn’t supposed to go like this... But I guess...”

As Serelipta mumbled on to himself, I began to brace myself. I didn’t want to make an enemy out of a god, but—

A colder chill than I had ever felt shot through me. Reflex took control of my body before I could, but even then, I was too slow. Serelipta had vanished, reappearing behind me. Now the water around me seemed heavy as cement and I couldn’t move a muscle.

Losing my cool now wouldn’t do me any favors. As calmly as I could, I asked, “What’s the meaning of this?”

“We’re kind of in an awkward spot for me to say this, but I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me. I really just want to get to know you. You can be frank with me, really. Actually, I only applied my first power so I could hear your honest thoughts.”

“I would have preferred that you led with that, instead of resorting to your divine powers. Now I’m not sure how truthful I can be with you.”

“Right. I didn’t intend things to get this far. Completely unexpected... Do you realize what you’ve just done?”

“Just that I felt a revolting sensation, and I moved on instinct. Judging by my pose, I guess I tried to attack you.” My right arm had been extended in a straight line out to the fingertips, through the spot where the god had been floating a minute ago.

“You chose an attack with the least water resistance... If I were a lesser god, you would have pierced my torso. And you deflected my powers *again*... I tried

to unravel you down to the deepest core of your soul, much stronger than when we were talking. Really, what is your deal? Humans shouldn't be able to fight off divine powers... Your resistance is way too strong."

"Like I said, I have no idea. How could a human understand what a god doesn't?"

"True... No point asking you, apparently. I'm going to have to look into you a little harder. Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you."

The next instance, something other than water engulfed me, nausea and disgust whirling through my body. My mind rejected comprehension as something relentlessly invaded, scouring for something inside me.

Fragments of unintelligible ramblings came from behind me:
"Look...this...reason...that's...bad taste...Earth...god... Even I can play dirty..."

Just as I tried to scream and demand an explanation, my vision went dark. Then, I felt a violent tumbling sensation, like I'd been thrown into a washing machine...until I eventually stopped.

Was I set free? Was I dead? The world was pitch black around me, and I couldn't lift a finger. On the other hand, I wasn't in pain any more. I wondered if I had blacked out from the experience, but it didn't seem like my time was up in the divine realm... Where was I? The divine realm was mostly a white void, except for objects materialized by the gods. Did the dark void mean I was in the opposite of the divine realm? Hell? No way... Even though I couldn't see or move, I felt a mysterious sense of ease. All I could do was think, so I kept guessing where I was.

Soon, I noticed a sound above me: *thunk, thunk, thunk...* The rhythmic sound began to approach me, and I could feel the vibration. It sounded like someone digging a hole. Was I buried in the ground?

Before long, the sound came right next to my head, and my vision turned to white.

"Whoa! You all right, laddie?!"

"Wh-Who are you?" I tilted my head back as much as I could to find a kindly middle-aged man wearing a straw hat and holding a hoe; he must have used to

dig me out.

“Not yer lucky day, is it?” he said. “I’ll get’cha outta there in a jiffy. Hold on, now.” With his bare hands, he swiftly but carefully brushed away the dirt covering my upper body like he was digging out a yam, before grabbing me under the arms and yanking me out of the ground like a radish.

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Long as yer all right. So, ya feeling sick at all? Hurt anywhere?”

“I’m all right, thank you.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Wha— Wilieris?!”

I turned to the shouting behind me to see a large pond, on the shore of which stood Wilieris, the goddess of the earth. I almost didn’t recognize her with her wrathful expression... Following her gaze, I saw Serelipta huddling his knees, sitting on the surface of the lake. While I couldn’t hear what they were saying, they were definitely engaged in conversation.

“Ay-yi-yi, wot a mess. Wouldn’t wanna stick me nose into that thar discussion. How’s about we jes’ sit around and keep a low profile fer now, eh?”

“Excuse me, but are you Grimp? The god of agriculture on perpetual honeymoon with Wilieris?”

“Oh, so ya do know me. Yer a sharp one, b’y. Ain’t ya that Ryoma kid wot came over ‘ere from Earth the other day? Me wife’s been yappin’ a lot about ya.”

“Thank you again for saving me. If you don’t mind me asking, how did I get here? I can’t remember what happened.”



“Well, as I’m sure ya know, we was on our billion-an’-somethin’th honeymoon when we ran into Serelipta’s little barrier thar. Now, given ‘ow we don’t see that every day, we go and cop a squiz, and we see ‘im givin’ ya a roight hidin’... So me wife, well...” Grimp seemed hesitant to discuss, so I didn’t press for details, but Wilieris had apparently broken the barrier rather forcefully, capturing Serelipta and I. She commenced her obviously very stern talking-to while Grimp was left to excavate me.

“Them two always been gettin’ along like cats ‘n’ dogs anyhoo...”

“So I see.”

“When the world got built, they was quarrelin’ over how much land or sea ta put in ‘er. Ever since then, they’ve always had choice words fer each other. Not th’ nice kind.”

“Quite the rivalry they’ve got...” I was watching the quarreling deities when Serelipta turned in my direction, finally noticing me.

“Ryoma!”

“Will you listen to me?!” cried Wilieris. “What am I going to do with him... Are you all right, Ryoma? Allow me to apologize for the actions of this maniacal god. I see he’s physically harmed you, on top of insulting you. Please forgive us.”

“Um... There’s no need for that,” I said. Wilieris held no blame in this.

“But...”

“Yeah, Wilieris. There’s no need to apologize,” Serelipta joined in.

“Shut up, Serelipta! You heard him, Ryoma. This pathetic excuse for a god not only won’t apologize, he doesn’t even think he did anything wrong.”

Yep. That much was obvious from my interaction with him so far. “I just have a feeling, after speaking with him, that Serelipta’s one of those... ‘Might makes right’ kind of—”

Serelipta beamed, and began approaching me. “Exactly! I knew you’d understand me, Ryoma. That’s exactly it, the universal truth among all creatures! You look fine already, and you’re talking with me. I thought you just might share my philosophy and/or understand me, and I wasn’t wrong! Most

humans even complain about my appearance—”

“Shaddap ya face.” Grimp held down Serelipta before he could reach me.

“Thank you,” I said. “By his logic, Serelipta, a god, is a higher being than me. There’s nothing a lowly human could say to change his mind.”

“But...”

“That’s enough. Ryoma ‘ere’s right. What’s the b’y supposed t’ do, anyhoo? No point puttin’ him in th’ hot seat,” Grimp interjected, putting himself between me and Wilieris. Psychologically speaking, this was very helpful.

“Yes... You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll report this incident to all of the other gods. Gain, Kiriluel, and Fernobelias should devise an appropriate punishment for him.”

“Ugh, not them again...”

“I will be assisting them, of course. Your actions today were in clear violation of our rules,” Wilieris said.

I was certainly happy to hear that the matter would be settled among the gods. While Serelipta was visibly annoyed by the prospect of more scolding, he didn’t try to deny that he had broken their rules.

“Thank you,” I said. “Once that is done, as far as I’m concerned, it’s water under the bridge.”

“Because I’m the god of ports? Hmm. You *do* need to work on your humor, Ryoma.”

Speak for yourself, dammit! And Wilieris is standing right there!

“Uh... Looks like things are about to get complicated, so I’m going to bounce! Oh, Ryoma!”

“What now...?” I couldn’t even bother to conjure any animosity towards him.

“Let me give you a fun tidbit about those mud slimes you’ve been looking for. You know the forests around the village you’re staying in? Use mud magic to stir up the soil. Mud slimes hide with their synchronized skill, so you can’t find them by sight. Move the mud they’re hiding under, and they’ll get spooked and

show themselves.”

“O-Okay. That’ll be useful.” For real, that was a great tip.

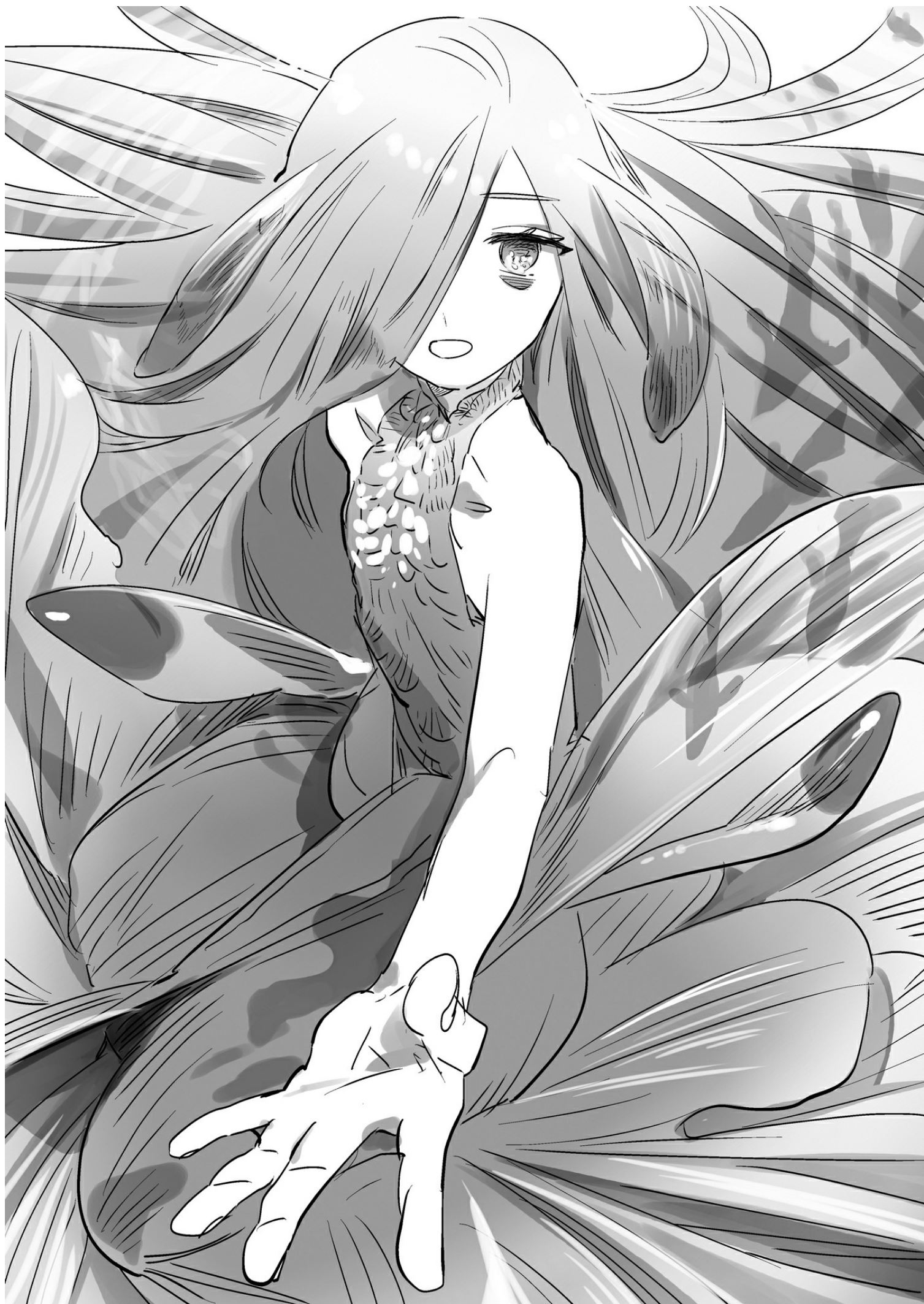
“See you, Ryoma. I’m hoping you’ll be *truly* happy, some day. Life’s about to get really hectic for you, so be ready, but do enjoy your peaceful days in the little village until then. And if you really feel like you can’t go on with life anymore... You know where to find me,” Serelipta said, with a suddenly somber tone and expression. His baggy and droopy eyes pierced me, daring anyone to mock him. “Bye!” he said, reverting to his same expression and sinking down into the lake.

“What was that about?” I asked after he completely vanished.

“Strange. He’s usually completely self-centered and inconsiderate. I haven’t seen him speak so sincerely in a few millennia.”

“Does that— Oops, looks like I’m out of time.” The familiar particles of light began floating around me. “I’ll get going too. Thank you for helping me out of that mess.”

“I hope we can talk longer next time. And...” Wilieris’s expression hardened. “I found out from Serelipta what he told you, Ryoma. I can’t ask you to forget about it now that you’ve heard it. So, allow me to give you a few words of my own... Your life belongs to you. Life is long, filled with trials and tribulations. You can take your time at each turn. Choose your own path. How you want to travel. How you want to live. You have the right and freedom to do so. Please, never forget that.”



“Thank you...”

“Oh, there’s somethin’ I wanted t’ tell ya.” Grimp tore through the heavy air. I recognized that he was a very considerate god, in contrast to Serelipta.

“Li’l wisdom when it comes t’ growin’ crops,” he explained. “All yer doin’ is strong-arming the buggers with fertilizer and magic.”

“I understand. I would like to learn proper farming methods when I have the time.”

“Good call, b’y. Yer sure ta get better harvests that way. I’ll tell ya more next time.”

“Thank you for the advice. I’ll see you both!” After a flash of light, I returned to the now-darkened plaza. “Phew...”

Apparently, gods could be all sorts of different characters... I had prayed because the lord of the land was coming tomorrow, but I hadn’t gained anything in that regard. On the other hand, I made it back safe and sound. I decided to go home and get to bed as soon as possible.

I left the shrine and started my way home. As I walked through the icy breeze, Serelipta’s warning resurfaced in my mind.

Life’s about to get really hectic for you, so be ready, but do enjoy your peaceful days in the little village until then. And if you really feel like you can’t go on with life anymore... You know where to find me.

It almost sounded like a prophecy. I would be in Gimul pretty soon, and I had heard that crime had gone up... What made him give such a solemn admonition?

Well, whatever. “Your life belongs to you.” True to Wilieris’s encouragement, I’ll continue living in this world. Even if everything Serelipta had said about me was true, I was going to pursue my own happiness here. Lucky for me, I had plenty of time.

Most importantly...

“I’m back!”

“Hello, Ryoma.”

“Dinner’s almost ready.”

“There you are!”

“Would you mind having a few drinks with dad, Ryoma?”

“Something happened today, but he’s going too fast for us to keep up.”

“In that case, I’ll gladly join in.”

No matter what the future held, there was no doubt that I was happy here and now.

Extra Story: Baba's Resolution and His Dream

"Fucking hell! It's too late now!"

In a small meeting room within a corporate office, now being used as a prep room for a press conference, a man was slamming his fists onto the desk, bellowing. The near-retirement-aged man opposite him, on the receiving end of the tirade, was Baba, who had been promoted to department chief after the death of Takebayashi Ryoma.

"Please calm yourself, sir," the secretary, who was around the same age as Baba, interrupted.

"Shut up! You stay out of this!" shouted the president of the company, a man still in his forties, going back to berating Baba.

"We don't have much time, sir..." the secretary reiterated.

"No shit! How can I change the script now, just when I'm about to go out there?!"

"Sir." Baba spoke up. "As it stands, the current script, no matter how much it dodges the issue at hand, can be boiled down to 'the higher-ups didn't know anything,' 'the employee's actions were unauthorized,' and 'the employee is solely responsible for the incident...' In short, that the company had nothing to do with it. The media would call that bluff in a heartbeat. They're not that stupid."

"Then what the fuck am I supposed to tell them?!"

"That the company is one hundred percent liable for all of this. Surely they already have enough evidence against us and our repeated labor code violations. We can't just talk our way out of this. Especially not when it's our employee who caused a violent incident. With all due respect, I can't take the fall for this alone. The situation is too big for that now. You have to do it."

"Like hell I will! If I go out there and tell them that, the company's dead!"

“There are no ifs about this anymore!” Baba raised his voice, after his president refused to accept their suggestions, or even accept reality. An awkward silence followed, which Baba eventually broke.

“I’m sorry, sir. The incident itself was one thing, but the company’s lack of action has actively worsened the situation and made us look worse. Even if we make it through today, do you have any plans to regroup?”

“Well...”

“There is nothing more we can do. This company is doomed. But giving closure to this situation will grant us a chance at starting over. And I will fully support you in that endeavor, sir. Please, have courage... Akinori.”

“Haven’t heard you call me by my name in some time...” The president, Akinori, had inherited the company from its founder—his father. The three currently in the meeting room had become like family friends.

“Still, you’re the one who always ignored what I went through, and now you want to stand by me?”

“A fair observation. I used to think you were beyond hope.” Baba remembered a time when the man before him was much younger. “A few years after you inherited the company from your late father...”

“Business was tanking... Employees who had worked for dad for years were quitting left and right. I know you wanted to leave too.”

“For a time, yes... But I had lost hope for you when you started making shady deals under the table. Gaining a client by taking in the son of an executive to save their face.”

“I was desperate! Dad had built this company from the ground up, and it was crumbling under my leadership. Competition grew with the evolution of computers... I had no choice! I had to protect the company at all costs!”

“I felt the same way. Still, I wanted you to fix the company in an honest way. I believed that the company, and you, had enough technology and experience to do so. I wanted to be a part of it from sales, the best I could.”

“That doesn’t mean anything now. I didn’t listen to you, and even transferred

you to development. You held a grudge for that, didn't you?"

"That's right. I was also a young man, then. A prideful one. I thought, at least, you would hear me out, but you even went and took me out of sales just so you wouldn't have to face me... It felt like everything I had worked towards in the company with your father had been trampled on."

"Then why try and help me now? Trying to kiss my ass now that you're in danger of losing your job? Well, if you're gonna get blamed for something you never did, I wouldn't blame you." Akinori gave a theatrical sneer, perhaps to Baba or perhaps to himself.

Baba spoke to him as old memories came back to him. "I began working for someone younger than me in dev."

"What are you getting at?"

"Takebayashi. The one who passed away the other day... I've been thinking a lot about things since... He made me realize I have unfinished business to attend to."

"Unfinished business?"

"Firstly, there's the matter of all the overworked schmucks in his department... They've all turned in their notices."

"What?! They're all quitting?! They all found different jobs that fast?!"

"It's strange... Everyone save for me had no issues finding new work."

"In the middle of a recession? Bah. Guess they don't want to be rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic," Akinori snarled.

Baba gave him a hurt look. "There's one more thing... Seeing how I abandoned you before, I know this will probably sound empty. But your father asked this of me." His eyes now gleamed with resolution, staring Akinori down. "'If the time comes...' he said, before he passed, 'make sure Akinori does what he must. I don't know what the future will hold. I hope things will never come to this, but if the time does come... I don't want him to turn his back on the company.' He also said he 'decided to pass the company to my son, as young as he is, because I believe he has the guts to take responsibility for the company.'"

I...”

“Enough!” Akinori squeezed out. “Why...? Why are you telling me all of this now...?! No, I get it. You’re all the same, everyone who worked for dad. It’s always about him, isn’t it?!”

“Akinori...”

“I know! I know you all had your hopes up for me! I know I was young! I wasn’t ready...! But no one ever looked at *me*! Everyone was looking *through* me, at dad. You were all trying to make me just like dad, and all of the companies we had business with changed their tune... I tried, desperately, to be good enough to fill dad’s footsteps. Was I that hard to follow? I must have been. Business was going down... That’s when that deal came in. We’d been dealing with that company since dad’s time. We had a good rapport. We couldn’t afford to lose such an important client when the company was so unstable... You think I wanted to hire those pieces of trash? It was supposed to be a one-time deal. I was going to refuse, once the company stabilized... Of course, by the time it did, they’d put me in a situation where I couldn’t say no... And look where we ended up.” Akinori chuckled in self-deprecation.

Nobody spoke for what seemed like an interminable stretch of time. “That’s enough. We’re done here. The script stays the same, Baba.”

“But, sir—”

“I said, enough! I’m not just flying by the seat of my pants here. Once we get through the press release, I *will* restabilize the company with the aid from the parents of those idiots and their company!”

“You can’t possibly—”

“Just watch me! I have to! It’s our last shred of hope! We may be up against the ropes, but I’ve got a fucking file cabinet full of records on those dipshits that I’ve been saving for a rainy day! I’ll just turn the tables and blackmail *them* into supporting our company!”

Silence fell over the room once more. Akinori, who had been screaming to himself in an obvious attempt to convince himself, had fallen speechless. He was petrified from head to toe, his gaze firmly fixated on Baba, who was

trembling. His fists were clenched so hard his nails dug into his palms, as tears streamed from his eyes.

Baba was overwhelmed with regret like he had never felt before. The young Akinori he remembered had indeed been less imperial than his father. Nonetheless, he was a young man who worked harder than anyone, and with integrity. The younger Akinori had made Baba want to support the young man, through and through. *How could I have let this happen?* Baba asked himself. *Why did I turn my back on him in his time of struggle?*

“I’m sorry, Akinori... I’m truly sorry...”

“What are you...? Your apology means nothing now. Get ready for the press —”

“No! You have to reconsider! I can’t let you commit any more crimes!”

“Times have changed! With the internet and social media... All anyone would have to do is type in my name and find out that I was a president here. How could I start over then? I have to get through this, and rebuild the company!”

“Still—”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Baba had grabbed Akinori’s shoulder, desperate to stop him. Akinori pushed him away. That was all it took for tragedy to strike.

“Look out!” the secretary shouted, and moved to catch Baba, all too late.

Baba fell backward, his head colliding with the corner of a desk.

“Baba!”

“A-Aki...nori...”

“N-No...”

Blood had stained the corner of the desk, and Baba lay immobilized.

“Baba... Your head... I...”

“I-It’s all right. It was...an accident. Please, reconsider... I beg you...” Baba implored as his mind faded away. He couldn’t hear Akinori’s response before he lost consciousness.

His desperate plea, however, would reach an unintended recipient...

■ ■ ■

“Where...?”

“Baba, sir! Can you hear me?!”

“Tabuchi...? Why are you...”

“I’ll— I’ll explain later! I have to get the doctor!”

Baba had awoken in a hospital bed, and Tabuchi rushed to click the nurse call button. A doctor and nurse soon arrived.

“Yes...” the doctor said upon examination, “you’ll be all right. We’ll have to keep you here for a while, but you shouldn’t have any lasting effects.”

“Hell yeah!” Tabuchi shouted. “Oh, sorry...”

“Heh, no worries. Thank you, doctor.”

“Take it easy, and rest well. Oh, that being said, I believe the police will come by tomorrow to interview you.”

“Understood...”

“Again, take it easy.”

Once the doctor and nurse had left, Tabuchi filled Baba in on what had happened.

“So,” Baba repeated, “you went to Takebayashi’s place by chance, met President Oya, then came to see me at the office because you were worried about me?”

“Something like that. I heard you were in the meeting room so I rushed over there and found you bleeding on the ground. I thought I was going to have a heart attack. If President Oya wasn’t there to tell me what to do... I tried to call an ambulance, but the president’s secretary told me not to, and the president was frozen and wouldn’t say anything. I tried to go outside and get help when the secretary shouted for security, so I almost got tackled down...”

“Really? Are you hurt, Tabuchi?”

“Oh, I’m totally fine. Hell, I even beat the fuck outta those two-bit security thugs!” Tabuchi boasted.

“Come on, I want to know the truth. Stop joking around.”

“It’s true, I did...! I was lucky, though.”

In fact, Tabuchi had been miraculously lucky. Once Tabuchi exited the meeting room to call for help, security had caught up to him, and he turned to face them. Intimidated by the burly security guards, Tabuchi reflexively reared back as his knees buckled. Tabuchi should have simply fallen on his back and let himself be apprehended. However, by chance, Tabuchi’s center of gravity was leaning back, the security guards were leaning forward, trying to catch Tabuchi, and the guards were grabbing Tabuchi by the arm or shirt. With those conditions combined, Tabuchi grabbed the hands clutching him when he fell, putting his entire weight on the security guards’ arms, managing to topple all three guards like he was some sort of judo master.

“It really was by chance, but the chief told me a lot about martial arts... So, that’s my guess as to what happened. My body comes in handy, sometimes.”

“I see. I understand now.”

It may be worth noting that Tabuchi had, perhaps from the recent stress or simply from overeating, reached 220 pounds.

“And the company...? I don’t know how long it’s been. Is the press release over?”

“It is... But things aren’t looking too good. There were already reporters there, and they saw you being taken away on the gurney... They’re even speculating about a *third* assault.”

“I see...”

“Oh, but have a look at this!” Tabuchi produced his phone from his pocket and pulled up an article on an online news site.

The article contained the taglines *“It’s all my fault,”* and *Uncovering the dark truth behind a company marred with scandals from an employee worked to death, interference with public service, and assault!*

“Did Akinori...?”

“Akinori? Oh, the president... Yes. He took full responsibility for everything that happened, and gave a thorough account to the media. Our reputation hasn’t plummeted like we expected... Of course, we’re still hurting from all of those incidents.”

“Right. But... He did reconsider...” A tear fell from Baba’s eye.

Seeing this, Tabuchi saw the close relationship Baba and the president had, and kept quiet.

The silence lasted for some time in the hospital room.

“Tabuchi... Do you know any gods by the name of Gain, Kufo, or Lulutia?”

“Um, what is this about?”

“I thought you were interested in mythology... And ‘light novels,’ are they called?”

“I know a bit about both... But I’m not sure if I recognize those names. They’re not major deities, in any case... But really, why are you asking?”

“Well... It’s just a dream, I’m sure... It felt like those gods came and spoke to me while I was out.”

“Were you going to be reincarnated, sir...? If you hadn’t woken up here? Do you have any superpowers?”

“I doubt it. I think the gods just let me talk. Like a confession. I can’t remember the details of what exactly we talked about... But afterward, the gods told me that they understood what I wanted.”

“Are you talking about the president...?”

“Of course. You wouldn’t know that...” Baba went on to explain his relationship with the president, and what had transpired before he was knocked unconscious.

“And the president had decided to be honest... I wonder if those gods were real.”

“That would be nice. They actually listened to me sincerely. It’s a shame I

can't remember it well, but it certainly put me at ease... Now that I think about it, I feel like they told me something important..."

"Important? Now I'm curious, sir. You have to remember."

"Easier said than done..."

"If the chief were here, he'd want to—"

"That's it!"

"What?"

"It was about Takebayashi. He's reincarnated in the world of those gods, and he's having a good time. That's what they said."

"For real...?"

"What do you think?"

"If it's real, I'm glad he's having fun... And I'm totally jealous."

They shared a look for a moment or two before they began to laugh.

"I hope those gods are real," Tabuchi said.

"Yes. I hope he's found happiness, somehow. The reincarnated heroes go on adventures in those stories, don't they?"

"It's a staple if it's a fantasy world. There's some variety around nowadays, like worlds that are similar to ours. Chief would be fine with a little bit of danger, though!"

"Oh, I don't doubt that... Did he have any black belts? I heard he was training, but I never asked about what martial art it was."

"Oh, it was...not about an offering... I think it was called Mumyo Shinzen."

"Nameless before the gods,' huh? I wonder if it's Shinto-based."

"I think that's it. It was in some really old book he gave me. Thing was written in fuckin' classical Japanese, of all things. Passed down from his ancestors."

"He has a book passed down from his ancestors?"

"He just laughed when I asked about it. Said they were a weird clan. Maybe his training is coming in handy in that fantasy world."

“I wonder... But in any case, I only wish him happiness.”

“I second that.”

The pair prayed to the gods of another world for the peace of Takebayashi Ryoma. They had no way of knowing if the gods were real, or why they had appeared in Baba’s dream, nor did they care.

Afterword

Hello. Roy here, author of By the Grace of the Gods!

Thank you so much for picking up volume 8 of BGG! Hughes finally gets married, and with the addition of new allies (or food, perhaps) Ryoma moves on to the fishing village of Sikum by a vast lake. Ryoma spends some quality time (some quieter than others) enjoying the peaceful village... Until a shadow is cast on his future towards the end of the volume. What awaits Ryoma and his lifestyle as the plot thickens...?

Speaking of new things on the horizon, I'm pleased to announce that the BGG anime is now in production! Preparations were being made quietly as volume 8 was being written and published! I was already overjoyed to have published (and continue to publish) my story, but now there's going to be an anime. I had received some comments online that people wanted to see an anime of the series, but of course, that's not an easy process. I always took those comments as an expression of the readers' appreciation for the series. Even if I fantasized about it a few times, I never really expected for this to happen. Truth be told, I first suspected that it was a scam or a prank, but it finally clicked when I began being involved in the process. I can't express how happy and grateful I am for the opportunity.

BGG has only grown this far because of readers like you who read and purchase the books! Thank you so, so much for your support! With faith in myself (I came this far, after all) and all of the readers out there, I will continue telling this story to the best of my ability.

I hope you take up volume 9, as well as check out the anime.

Bonus Short Stories

A Day at Work

“Great work today.”

“Likewise.”

One night, the employees of Bamboo Forest, the laundry shop in Gimul, were relaxing in the break room as they awaited dinner.

“So, Ox, are you getting used to things around here?”

“Most certainly, thanks to you. In fact, I was surprised to be treated so well.”

“That’s great to hear. Our boss is very particular about doing right by his employees.”

“Plus, Chief always gets us souvenirs whenever he travels far away!”

“You always get so excited over them, Maria. Where did he go this time, Fina?”

“Fatoma, I think.”

“There’s a large lake in Fatoma, and they’re famous for their fish, ladies.”

“Okay, guess we’re getting fish for souvenirs!”

“They can be quite expensive at the shops.”

“Do you know the place well, Ox?”

“Gladiators often go on tour to enter tournaments so I heard about Fatoma somewhat when I fought at the colosseum in the neighboring land of Antrum.”

“Ah, but we didn’t know any of that...”

“We never really left the village until we came to work here.”

“I have always longed to travel, even for business... You are much more knowledgeable than us, Ox.”

“Is that so...? This may be the first time I’ve been complimented on my knowledge instead of my sword...”

“I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“You’re pretty easy to talk to, aren’t you?”

“I thought you were scary at first!”

“It isn’t uncommon for more popular gladiators to be invited to noble dinners and events, so I try to...”

“Heh, you’re blushing!”

“Um... Am I being mocked?”

“No, not at all!”

“Right. It’s getting a bit scary out there, so I’m glad we have someone strong on the team.”

“We’re also *very* glad that said someone is so easy to converse with.”

“Um...”

“Looks like the master swordsman can’t take on three girls in the verbal colosseum.”

“Apparently so.”

Every once in a while, the shop’s break room would be filled with friendly laughter...

Yui’s Musings

“Um... Would you like to go with me, then? I have the day off too. I think I would be able to help, in some small way...”

“Really? That would be great! In that case...”

Phew. That should do it for the day. If things go smoothly, I might have another couple on my hands by the time they return to the manor tomorrow morning.

The maid, who had been watching a couple of servants with reddened cheeks

conversing from the shadows, now moved to the garden. Along the way, she passed many servants and guards, but none of them reacted to her.

More and more people are becoming hyperaware of the opposite sex. It's obvious what caused this change, though.

The maid recalled the wedding of Hughes and Lulunese the other day.

A wedding like that is extremely rare. Even in the many years I've spent in this world, I've never seen such a grand celebration with that large of a crowd in attendance. Moreover, the happy couple received five blessings from the gods between them. No other couple could have dreamed of something like that, even at a royal wedding... It's only natural for people to want to ride the wave from their nuptials, especially if they already have someone they fancy. It's more fun for me, but it's hard work just keeping an eye on so many potential pairings. Speaking of, I wonder what he's doing? He's the catalyst of all of this, after all...

The maid pondered about the boy from another world...and someone else.

Maybe it's because he was from Earth, more specifically from Japan like Shiho, but there was a tiny bit of resemblance when he celebrated the happiness of others... Not that I see any other similarities. And what's with him, anyway? I approached him to help him out because Shiho asked me to... Shiho had struggled to escape the forest, risked her life to make it to civilization, and took a long time to acclimate to this world. Meanwhile, he apparently survived in the same forest for three years, and then completely adjusted to town life in under a year. After all the trouble of approaching him, there was barely anything I could help with! Not that it's his fault for being so independent... I just thought Japanese people were physically and mentally fragile in exchange for their sophisticated technology. Or was Shiho just weaker than average?

The maid remembered her old mistress, then shook her head.

No. From what I've heard about Japanese people from Shiho, he's got to be an outlier. Like how he nonchalantly brushed off my illusionary magic because of some unexplained immunity. How humiliating. I've only been using illusionary magic for three hundred years. If that wasn't part of the powers given to him by the gods, then what powers did they give him? Shiho had received the ability to communicate with all species, and could read people's minds and experience

others' memories, all with the bonus of remaining undetected by those she used her powers on. She had close to no combat abilities, but she was unparalleled when it came to interpersonal battles of wits and information, especially among the nobles. Not that she often liked to use her powers in that way...

Nonetheless, any powers bestowed by the gods would certainly be strong. Knowing that, I've always wondered if those powers of his would ever become a threat to the family—Shiho's descendants. While he seems to bear no animosity towards them, I still can't help considering it.

One possibility is his swordsmanship, like what he showed in his matches against that slave. But I sensed years of training, a sort of history in his moves. Weapons and fighting techniques do tend to survive even in peaceful civilizations. He must have been a renowned swordsman or something in Japan. His magical abilities were mediocre, if I'm being fair. He shows he's had great practice, considering it's only been three years since he came to this world, but there are still plenty of magic users with greater potency. His magic simply isn't good enough to be god-bestowed power. The amount of his magical energy was remarkable, but so was Shiho's; apparently, that's a default feature of people from Earth. So was he given more obscure, specialized powers instead...? I wish I knew...

The maid continued contemplating the matter until she arrived at the now-deserted wedding venue. She then gazed up to the sky.

“He doesn't seem like a bad person. If given the chance, I wouldn't mind seeing him again.”

The voice of Yui, a fairy in maid's clothes, faded into the wind before she disappeared herself.

Kohaku in the Morning

My mornings always started early, what with me being the leader and all. I rose before my flock, and quietly climbed out of my nest. Of course, no one usually spoke to me at this hour...

“You're up early.”

“Oh, good morning.”

But now, I had a neighbor—Eins, the nightmare limour bird. We recently got a new owner, Ryoma, and had moved into this magical space created by him.

Eins and his friends were here first, but were kind enough to make a lot of accommodations so our large flock could be comfortable.

“Alone again...?” He asked.

“Yes. Everyone else’s still asleep.”

“I know you can’t do much about it, but how come your parents are sleeping in while a newborn chick is serving as leader...?”

I had to get a quip in at that. I wasn’t about to cover for them treating me unfairly.

“Well, we’ve belonged to a human since birth... Humans protect us, so we pretty much don’t have any predators. We really just need someone to mediate infighting.”

“You’re doing great, really... We’ll be spending more time in this space for the time being. Just let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you. I’ll try my best to keep the flock from getting in your way.”

“But trouble *is* brewing?”

“I guess my guests are sulking that they can’t fly like you...”

“I did notice some nasty looks.”

“Sorry about that. I’ll make them stick to our territory. Please, ignore them if they say anything to you.”

“Don’t worry. I know how to handle the type. If it gets out of hand, I’ll speak to the master.”

“That would be great. That ought to keep them quiet for a while.”

“Indeed... Well, I didn’t mean to keep you.”

“No, it’s much appreciated. I’ll get going now.”

“See you later.”

Eins roosted on a perch set in his territory, and I returned to my morning duties.

“First, I’ll have to check breakfast... The flock bickers constantly if they get a little less food or if it’s late... Then check the eggs, do a little patrolling... Pick up any big trash...”

There were a lot of things to do now, but life was better than before. I had to be vigilant in my morning patrol so I could maintain this environment and lifestyle, prevent any quarrels and complaints... But most of all, to keep my sanity intact.

Another typical morning...

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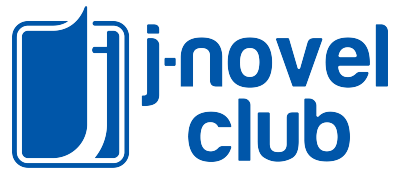
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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 8

by Roy

Translated by Adam Seacord Edited by Nathan Redmond

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